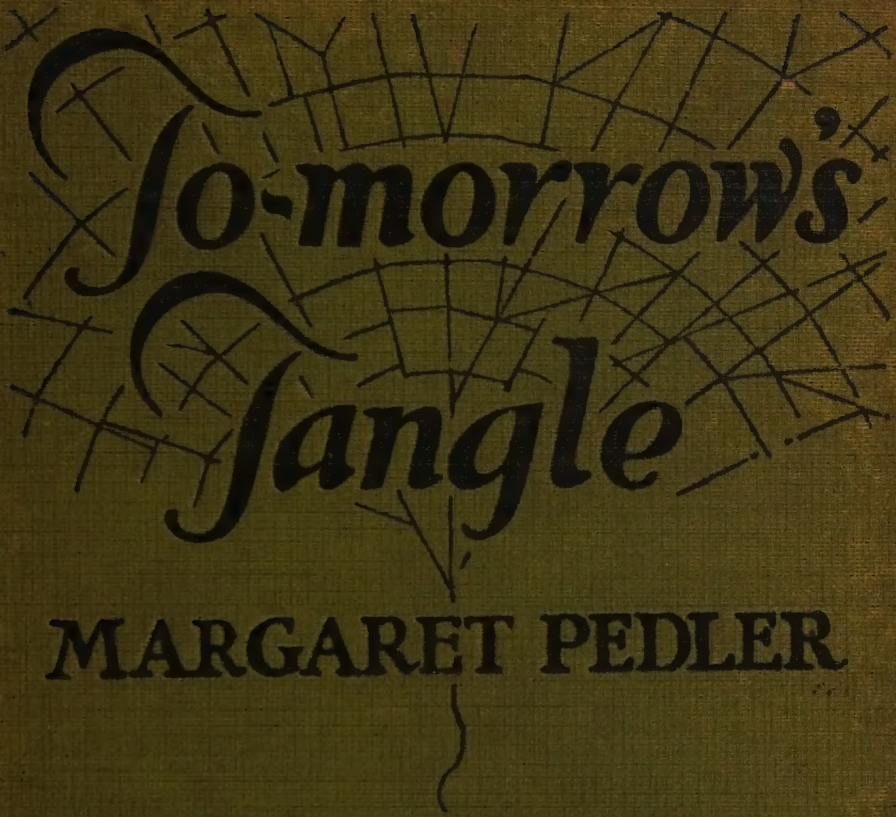

MARGARET PEDLER

1926.

Merry Christmas.

To Aunt Ida.

from Ida

TO-MORROW'S TANGLE

MARGARET PEDLER

By
MARGARET PEDLER

TO-MORROW'S TANGLE
RED ASHES
WAVES OF DESTINY
THE BARBARIAN LOVER
THE VISION OF DESIRE
THE MOON OUT OF REACH
THE LAMP OF FATE
THE SPLENDID FOLLY
THE HERMIT OF FAR END
THE HOUSE OF DREAMS-COME-TRUE

NEW YORK:
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

TO-MORROW'S TANGLE

BY

MARGARET PEDLER

"To-morrow's Tangle to the Winds Resign."
RUBAIYAT OF OMAR KHAYYAM

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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BY MARGARET PEDLER

TO-MORROW'S TANGLE

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BOOK ONE

TO-MORROW'S TANGLE

Book One

CHAPTER I

BETRAYAL

THE hot July sunlight slanted across Romney Square, beating down remorselessly upon its broad pavements and iron-railed gardens. Earlier in the year those same gardens, with their lawns and shaded ways, must have held a green, restful charm for eyes wearied by the constant sight of bricks and mortar, but now the dry, airless heat of a London summer had browned the short-cut grass and wilted the trees. There was a mournful end-of-the-season appearance about them as they drooped, dusty-leaved and tired-looking, above empty paths. For at this hour of the afternoon the accumulated heat of the day had driven most people indoors in search of the comparative coolness afforded by lowered sunblinds, and at the moment the square was deserted save for an errand-boy sauntering leisurely about his business. Presently he turned the corner, and, as the sound of his footsteps died away, complete tranquillity descended once more upon the square. It might almost have been a place of the dead, so utterly still and quiet it lay.

All at once the silence was broken. The door of one of the tall houses opened and closed again crisply and a man

descended the house steps and walked rapidly away, with a long, swinging stride, in the direction of the main road.

He did not turn his head to look back. If he had done so, he might have observed a woman standing on the balcony of the house he had just quitted, following with her eyes his progress down the street. Keen old eyes, peering out from beneath pouching, shrivelled lids. There was nothing of kindness in them—of the kindness and understanding which is the compensation of old age—only a shrewd curiosity, with something almost malicious about it.

For a moment or two the owner of the eyes remained on the balcony, watching the man as he strode down the street, then she turned back and re-entered the room behind. She walked with a stick, leaning heavily upon it, and seated herself in a high-backed chair—a little, bent old woman with a withered face like a shrivelled walnut, so incredibly old and wrinkled that it seemed almost impossible to believe that she had ever been fresh and sweet to look at. Yet in the long-ago 'sixties Charlotte Mells had been famous for her beauty, and it was that same beauty which had converted her into Lady Farnby. Her people had been as poor as the proverbial church mouse, scraping their way through society as best they could, until along came Farnby, rich, and gay, and debonair, and promptly laid his heart and his rent-roll at her feet.

And now life had taken from her all that really mattered. Her husband had been dead so long that she had almost forgotten him—forgotten, at any rate, the splendid lover he had made in the days of her youth—and the gathering years had slowly robbed her of every vestige of that beauty which had once counted for so much. Only the rent-roll still remained, the possession of which

afforded her a certain sardonic amusement, since she was perfectly aware of the small horde of relatives who were living in hungry anticipation of the day when it should come to be divided amongst them.

But old Lady Farnby had not the slightest intention of quitting this world for another at present. There were still certain pleasures remaining to her, primarily that of baiting people who, by reason of her great wealth and their great lack of it, were unable to retaliate. She had a reputation for the most acid tongue in London, and it amused her immensely to see people cringe beneath it.

There was only one person who never cowered under her sharp speeches—or, if she did, successfully concealed the fact—and that was her great-niece, Iris Lethbridge, whom she had been impatiently awaiting ever since the departure of the man whose going she had watched from the balcony.

She came at last, sauntering into the room with a serene air of detachment that secretly infuriated the old woman in the high-backed chair. Iris was a poor relation, dependent upon her not only for the exquisite frocks she wore, the maid who brushed her wonderful red-brown hair, and all the other luxuries of life at Romney Square, but for the very bread she ate, yet she possessed a curious independence of spirit—an indifference—which her great-aunt had never been able to break down.

Perhaps, in a way, the old lady respected her for it, although hating it at the same time. At any rate, quarrel with her as she might and did, she never went to extremes with her and ordered her out of the house, as she had done other poverty-stricken relatives who had essayed at various times the difficult task of companioning

her ladyship. Since the death of her father, seven years ago, Iris had made her home with her, and it looked as though the arrangement were likely to continue until either the marriage of the one or the death of the other brought matters to an enforced end.

"What's Straton Quayne been here for?" demanded Lady Farnby, as her niece subsided into a chair—subsided with a slow, lithe grace of movement that held something feline in it.

Iris produced a small gold case and selected and lit a cigarette before replying. Then:

"Who told you he had been here?" she asked.

The old woman's black eyes flickered amusedly.

"I don't need telling. I know all that goes on in my house," she snapped, with a slight emphasis on the final pronoun.

A faint smile crossed her niece's lips.

"You would," she responded. "Do all the servants act as your spies—or only one or two selected ones?"

A dull red crept up under Lady Farnby's parchment skin.

"In this case my own senses were sufficient guide," she retorted. "What did Quayne come for?"

Iris leaned her head negligently back against a cushion. Its dull black surface, embroidered in soft blues and flame-colour, served to emphasise the warm chestnut hair swathed closely round her head and the misty hyacinth-blue of her eyes—eyes that held something of the appeal of a young child's, so incongruously does nature sometimes fit the outer to the inner woman.

"He came to ask me to marry him," she answered quietly.

Lady Farnby's gaze rested curiously on her great-niece.

There was a certain admiration in it, but no softening. Rather was it a chill, grudging admiration, as though, even while she could not but acknowledge the beauty of the face opposite her, it yet afforded her no satisfaction. One might almost have read a species of envy in the piercing old eyes.

"I suppose, then, you sent him about his business?" she said at last.

"On the contrary," replied Iris insouciantly, "I told him I'd marry him."

"What? What did you say?" Lady Farnby's voice sharpened with astonishment. Her small, claw-like hand closed round the head of her walking-stick and she half rose from her chair. "You told him you'd marry him? *Marry* him?"

"Yes. You needn't look so horrified. It's a perfectly respectable thing to do."

"Respectable?" The old woman almost screamed. "Respectable? When not a week ago you promised Jack Wyndham you'd marry *him!* What are you going to do, may I ask? Marry them both? Or what?"

"Discard from strength," replied Iris composedly.

Lady Farnby banged the floor with her stick.

"You little fiend!" she croaked, her voice cracking under the explosive force of her indignation. "Oh, you little fiend! . . . I told Jack he was a fool ever to agree to a private engagement! He didn't know whom he was dealing with. But *I* knew. I suppose you took him because Quayne was hanging fire and you didn't want to fall between two stools?"

Iris had gone rather white.

"Yes, you would think that," she said rather bitterly.

"Don't I know you? Haven't you given me nothing but trouble ever since you were eighteen? Trouble and worry—trouble and worry," grumbled the old woman.

"Well, at least my marriage to Straton will relieve you of that," said Iris coolly.

"Pah! I know Quayne's well-off," retorted her great-aunt. "Much better off than Jack Wyndham. Otherwise you wouldn't have thrown Jack over for him. But you've picked a rod for your own back this time, if I'm not mistaken. It's bad tactics to play fast and loose with two men like Jack and Straton Quayne, who are David and Jonathan to one another. Quayne's got a will of his own—as you'll find out." A look of malevolent glee gleamed in her eyes, as though the prospect pleased her. "And who, pray, is going to tell Wyndham that he's superseded? Not I, I assure you. I've got you out of that kind of scrape before, but I told you last time, when you broke your word to Miles Ingram, that I wouldn't do the dirty work again for you."

"I shall write to Jack to-night and explain." Iris rose indifferently as she spoke, and a faint, enigmatic smile flitted over her face as she added: "I suppose I'm to take all this as your peculiar method of congratulation?"

"Congratulation?" shrilled the old woman. "I don't congratulate you, or Quayne either—him least of all! You're a worthless woman, Iris—just as your mother was before you. No more feeling than a brass tack."

Iris, on her way to the door, paused for a moment and glanced back.

"Surely that's only to be expected?" she said. Then, looking straight into the shrivelled old face, she added: "Heredity always tells."

"Spiteful little cat!" muttered Lady Farnby as the

door closed softly behind her great-niece. "Spiteful little cat!"

For the rest of the afternoon Iris remained conspicuous by her absence. Her great-aunt, taking tea in compulsory solitude, supposed that the time was being devoted to the task of writing his dismissal to Jack Wyndham. Probably, she reflected with a grim smile, the letter was a difficult one to concoct and was giving her precious niece more trouble than she had anticipated.

If this were so, Iris showed no sign of it when, later on, she descended composedly to dinner, wearing a frock of orange and gold tissue which flamed with her hair. Lady Farnby sniffed at she regarded her.

"Going out as usual?" she observed.

Iris nodded.

"Yes," she replied laconically.

"Huh!" Another sniff. "Which of 'em's wasting his money on you to-night?"

The expression of the hyacinth-blue eyes remained unaltered. Iris looked tranquilly across at her ill-tempered relative.

"Sir John Anvill is giving a supper party at the Savoy," she answered equably.

"And I suppose you'll dance till all hours?"

"I suppose so."

After which Lady Farnby devoted her attention to her dinner and the conversation languished.

The scene provoked a sharp sense of contrast; it suggested something intriguing, problematical. A typical London dining-room, perfectly appointed, menservants moving noiselessly about, the gleaming mahogany table with splashes of golden candlelight tremulous on its smooth, brown surface, and at one end of the table the

little shrunken figure, bent with extreme age, of the woman whose barren life was inevitably drawing to its close, while at the other, her hyacinth-blue eyes grown curiously adream, a girl whose youth and unusual beauty premised a multitude of possibilities.

It was not until dessert had been placed upon the table and the servants had withdrawn that something occurred to break the quiet which prevailed. The butler re-entered, bearing a letter on a salver, which he offered to Iris, and as her eyes fell upon the handwriting of the envelope, the dream which had lain in them broke up suddenly and fled away.

The letter was very brief.

"After leaving you this afternoon I happened to meet Jack Wyndham and, naturally, gave him my news. In return he told me of his engagement to you. I don't think I need say any more except that, of course, in view of Jack's prior claim, I retire unconditionally.

Straton Quayne."

As she read the few short lines every drop of blood drained itself away from Iris's face. With swift inner vision, she could conjure up the meeting of the two friends—Straton, his face transfigured as it had been when he left her so short a time before. Then a quick interchange of words and sentences—sentences that damned her utterly—and the radiance suddenly wiped out of Straton's face, while the two men, each betrayed by the same woman, stood staring starkly, incredulously at one another.

She brushed her hand over her eyes. What malignant

fate had brought those two together before she could explain—before she could free herself from the cords which bound her to Jack Wyndham? It was like some bad dream—a nightmare of horrible coincidence. And then she caught her great-aunt's eyes fixed inquisitively upon her, and with an effort she steadied herself.

The old woman nodded maliciously towards the letter, the jerky movement reminding Iris irresistibly of a bad-tempered parrot making a dive through cage-bars at an intrusive finger.

"That's Quayne's handwriting," croaked the old woman. "What's he writing to you for in such haste?" Then, as Iris made no answer: "You may as well tell me. I shall certainly find out, if I have to ask him myself."

"Yes, I may as well tell you. He—he met Jack this afternoon."

Lady Farnby clicked her tongue delightedly against the roof of her mouth.

"Hee, hee!" she gibed. "So all the fat's in the fire, eh? You've overreached yourself this time, my dear. I thought you would one day. What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know yet. Get things straightened out somehow, I suppose."

"You won't find it so easy as you think. Quayne's got his own ideas about women—and pretty definite ones as regards his future wife, or I'm much mistaken. And I don't think they include the kind of woman who gets herself engaged to two men at the same time and then dismisses the one who has the least of this world's goods."

Iris sprang to her feet and walked across to the fire-

place, where the crimson and gold and purple of banked flowers took the place of leaping flames. She stared down at them unseeingly.

"Straton, surely, has less to complain of than Jack," she broke out at last. "It's Jack who has been badly treated."

"Quite true, my dear. He has—very badly. But still I fancy you'll find Mr. Quayne a trifle unmanageable. He'll require a good deal of pacifying, I should say."

"He may," answered Iris. "But if I explain, I think he'll understand, and"—in a low voice—"and forgive."

Lady Farnby regarded her consideringly for a moment.

"Perhaps you're right. No man ever yet thought much the worse of a woman for throwing another man over on his account," she commented cynically. "It's too handsome a tribute to his innate conceit—and shows such good taste on the woman's part!" she added with a chuckle.

"Yes, yes," said Iris eagerly, hardly heeding the irony that tinctured the speech. "It's Jack—Jack, not Straton—who has the right to be angry with me."

Her great-aunt, who had hobbled after her to the hearth-side, peered up at her curiously.

"Why, why," she cackled in her hard, dry old voice, "I believe you really think yourself in love this time, Iris?"

And Iris, looking back at her with troubled eyes, answered quietly:

"I don't think it. I know."

For a long moment the old woman and the young one stood staring at each other silently. Then all at once the silence was broken by the raucous yell of a newsboy in the square outside.

"'Orrible discovery in Greville Chambers! Suicide of——" The voice trailed away into the distance.

Iris's hand closely convulsively on the edge of the chimney-piece.

"Suicide of *whom?*" she demanded in a quick, frightened whisper. "Did you hear?"

"It sounded like——" Lady Farnby paused, then added meaningly: "Wyndham lives at Greville Chambers."

"It didn't sound like Wyndham," said Iris quickly. "It didn't," she repeated, as though trying to convince herself.

"Ring the bell," snapped her great-aunt. "I'll tell Williams to get an evening paper."

But when the butler came in response to the bell's summons he had already bought one, and tendered it to his mistress with an air of suppressed excitement.

"Shockin' thing, my lady," he said eagerly. "Mr. Wyndham 'as committed suicide. Shot 'imself through the head." And retired, feeling that he had satisfactorily delivered his bombshell.

Lady Farnby adjusted her spectacles very slowly. It seemed to Iris, standing beside her, with her hands nervously clenching and unclenching, that she was being deliberately slower than usual. She could have screamed at her.

"It's quite true," said the old woman at last. Adding nastily: "Do you think—now—that you'll pacify Straton Quayne so easily?"

CHAPTER II

ON THE TERRACE

TWO months may appear a very long or a very short time, according to circumstances. To Iris, the two months which had elapsed since the night when Jack Wyndham took the swiftest road out of a life that had suddenly become unbearable seemed the longest she had ever known.

To begin with, contrary to her usual custom, her great-aunt had entirely declined to go abroad to one or other of the cheery Continental places where the English are wont to foregather when the London season ends. Instead, she insisted upon spending the summer at her country home, Farnby Chace, which lay not a mile from Doon St. Frances, a little village on the southern coast of Devon. She had refused, moreover, to invite any guests to help while away the tedium of the long, empty days, and when Iris protested she voiced her reasons in no uncertain terms.

"You've only got yourself to thank," she asserted. "At present you're not particularly in demand, and you might as well recognise the fact. Jack Wyndham was far too popular everywhere for his suicide not to have upset a good many people pretty badly. And as everyone who knows anything—and everybody always *does* know—puts it down to you, it's just as well you should keep out of the limelight for a bit. Though I know," added the

old woman maliciously, "you'll find the process rather tedious."

It was true. Although the newspapers had made the most of evidence which had cropped up showing that certain debts had been worrying Wyndham prior to his death, the more perspicacious of them hinted broadly that an unfortunate love affair "with a beautiful young woman well known in London society" was the primary cause of his taking his life.

In addition to this, although Jack's engagement to Iris had been kept secret, his admiration for her had been no secret at all, so that everyone had come to the conclusion that after playing with him throughout a couple of seasons Iris had finally turned him down. And since Jack had been extraordinarily popular with both men and women alike, whilst Iris's beauty had acted as an unscalable fence betwixt her and the friendship of other women, censure and gossip had both been busy with her name.

Reluctantly she had acknowledged to herself that there was a certain amount of shrewd common sense in Lady Farnby's decision to keep her out of the public eye till the gossip had subsided, but these eight long weeks, marooned in the depths of the country, had been sheer purgatory. With nothing to distract her thoughts, she had been forced for the first time in her life to face the issue of her own actions, and—also for the first time in her life—had found herself powerless to recall to her side a man who had left her in anger.

Before she and her aunt quitted London she had written to Quayne, asking him to come and see her, and received no answer. Then, banking on the magic of her voice—for the sound of a beloved voice holds a stronger appeal than that of any written word—she had rung him

up on the telephone, only to discover that he was out of town. For a short time this latter piece of information seemed to hold out the possibiilty of a meeting with him in the near future, since he was the owner of Quayling, the adjacent property to Farnby Chace. But, on her arrival at Doon St. Frances, Iris learned that he had shut up his house and gone abroad.

The news had come as a blow, bringing with it disturbing memories of the last occasion when she and Lady Farnby had been at the Chace. They had spent the previous April there, and a sudden heat wave had converted spring almost into summer. Iris could remember long evenings spent strolling about the gardens at Quayling, or sitting on the terrace, she and Straton together, while Lady Farnby cracked jokes and exchanged reminiscences with Sir John Morthan, an old crony of her younger days whom Quayne had diplomatically asked to meet her.

Once again Iris could see the young April moon coming up over the sea, hear the waves at the foot of the cliff crooning a low diapason to those clipped, tense sentences of Straton's which had sent her pulses racing as no speech of any other man had ever had the power to do. And now it was September, and the harvest moon hung like a big round lamp in the sky, bathing the whole world in its golden light.

Standing at the open French window, she could just catch a glimpse of the red roof of Quayling, gleaming warmly betwixt the trees. Behind her, in the circle of light thrown by an electric lamp, sat Lady Farnby, presumably reading, but actually nodding drowsily over her book. Iris glanced towards her, hesitated, then, as though yielding to some compelling impulse, she crossed the threshold of the room and passed out into the balmy

September night, bending her steps towards Quayling.

No definite fence of iron railings separated the latter from the Chace. The woods of either met and mingled in a friendly sort of way. Only somewhere on the Ordnance map, bisecting a long, rambling copse, ran a fine line, determining where the boundaries of the two properties touched.

Almost unconsciously Iris's feet traversed the once familiar way. It was quite dry underfoot, and fallen leaves and twigs crackled whisperingly beneath her tread. At last she emerged, a little to the right of the house, and paused to look at its closed and shuttered windows. A single light glimmered in what she knew to be the kitchen premises, moving slowly hither and thither. Presumably the caretaker left in charge was locking up for the night.

With a caught breath at the recollection of the days when all those windows had gleamed a welcome to her, Iris turned and made her way on to the terrace which overlooked the sea. It had a desolate appearance. A few chairs stood here and there, some of them inverted, so that their legs stuck up aimlessly towards the sky. The flagged paving was unswept and the first autumn leaves, dry and shrivelled, lay in small neglected heaps against the stone balustrade, where they had been blown by a seaward breeze. A faint sprinkling of sand gritted unpleasantly beneath her feet as she crossed the flagstones and, leaning her arms on the coping of the balustrade, looked out over the sea. That, at least, was unchanged. Tranquil and calm it lay in the moonlight, the silver track of moon-washed ripples losing itself at last beneath the overhanging cliff.

She felt her heart contract. The memory of the past

came flooding over her—of that April past when she had thought Straton cared for her. Afterwards he had gone away, without saying anything, and she had plunged into the whirl of the London season and tried to forget. When, in June, he reappeared in town, he had treated her with no more than ordinary friendliness, and, finally, she had engaged herself to Jack Wyndham. Last of all surged up the remembrance of that burning July day when Quayne had come to the house in Romney Square and asked her to be his wife, of the short-lived happiness purchased at the price of her given word, and then of the terrible ending of it all.

The silence of the deserted terrace beat up about her, poignant with memories, and a shiver ran through her body, though the eyes that gazed seaward were dry and tearless.

She could not have told how long she had been standing there, absorbed in her thoughts, when all at once the silence was broken. Footsteps sounded on the flagging, then stopped abruptly, as though suddenly arrested. Turning swiftly round to see who was thus intruding on her solitude, she uttered an involuntary cry.

"You!" she exclaimed breathlessly. Adding hurriedly, as though trying to explain away her presence there: "I —I came out for a stroll. I never expected to see you here."

Straton Quayne advanced from the house-shadows in which he had been standing.

"Surely the most natural place in the world to find me—in my own home," he said coolly.

As he emerged, the moonlight fell full upon his tall figure, and with a kind of desperate eagerness Iris's gaze fastened on him, nervously seeking the changes which

two months had wrought. They were there, unmistakably. There was the same lean, dark face, but grown a trifle leaner than ever and tanned by a southern sun, the same deep-set grey eyes—almost startlingly grey in their framing of dark brows and sunburnt skin—the same square jaw and dogged mouth with the sensitive, upward curve at its corners. But the eyes held a new, impenetrable expression, hard and somewhat weary, and the mouth closed in a curiously bitter line that seemed to contradict the inherent sweetness of those upturned corners.

Iris's own eyes dropped swiftly. Those changes in his face, slight as they were, hurt her inexpressibly.

"I thought—you were abroad," she faltered at last.

"I have been. I returned to London yesterday and motored down to fetch some papers I needed. My caretaker having gone to bed leaving a door unbolted, I got in without disturbing him and was just foraging in the larder for some food when I caught sight of a figure on the terrace. So I came out to investigate who my nocturnal visitor might be." Quayne spoke with a kind of detached indifference that seemed to set her miles away from him, cutting the past from under her feet.

"And—and now?"

"Why, now, I won't intrude upon you any longer," he replied with a slight bow. "I'll go back to my larder."

He turned as he spoke, and for a moment she stood motionless, watching him in silence as he crossed the moon-white flagstones towards the house.

He had almost reached it when she called to him.

"Straton!" And there was something in her voice, some note of desperate, imperative appeal that suddenly shattered the assumed indifference which had character-

ised the brief interchange of words between them. He halted, then slowly retraced his steps, pausing a little apart from her.

"Do you want me?" he said.

"Yes, I want you," she answered, her voice trembling a little. "Straton, must you—need you be so hard?"

"Am I hard?" he asked. Then, with a short, bitter laugh: "Hard! What else does a woman expect when she dupes and fools two men—*and they find it out?*"

"Not two," she said swiftly. "I never fooled you. I —loved you."

"And did you think I'd take your love—if it was love —buy it at the expense of Jack's life?"

"Straton," she broke in eagerly. "I couldn't know— how could I?—that Jack would kill himself. I meant to tell him—I'd written—that very night. I wrote——"

"I know." His mouth curved bitterly. "His mother got the letter—the next morning, when he was dead. And I persuaded her to burn it—not to let it become a luscious morsel in the press for all the world to gloat over."

"Did you do that?" she asked slowly. "That was— good of you."

"Good?" He laughed. "Do you imagine I was thinking of you when I did it? Not I. It was to save Jack— to keep his secret from the world at large—as I know he would have wished it kept."

She winced.

"You are kind enough, pitiful enough to Jack. Haven't you any pity for me—I who have lost everything?" She held out her arms, white in the moonlight, then let them drop desolately to her sides.

"You will forget," he said. "Women like you forget

easily—when you've found another fool to worship you!"

"Forget?" she answered, her voice harsh with pain. "Shall you—forget, Straton?"

"God knows!" he answered. "If a man can forget a love that grips him body and soul, a love of which he is ashamed, a love that holds nothing but torment for him—then I shall forget."

She drew a step nearer to him.

"Can't you forgive me?" she said, lifting her face imploringly to his. "Any other man who loved would have forgiven me."

"Would he? Then he would have loved differently. . . . I loved all of you. Not only your beauty"—his eyes rested on the loveliness of her, pale, like some storm-swept lily in the moonlight—"but your sweetness, your tenderness; above all, your truth. And when you took that from me——"

"Never from you," she broke in swiftly. "I was faithful to you. Not to Jack, I know—but to you." She touched his arm timidly, beseechingly. "Does that count for nothing?"

He drew away from her.

"You can't be faithful to one man and unfaithful to another. That's neither truth nor faith—merely opportunism."

"Straton, I would have been faithful to you always—utterly faithful, because I loved you."

"No." He shook his head. "It isn't in you to be really faithful to any man—once he was your lover. Till then—yes, because of your need to conquer him and bring him to his knees. But once he is yours, body and soul, then you've done with him. You want your game of conquest—fresh fields and pastures new"—with a harsh

sneer in his voice. "And if I married you, you would betray me as you betrayed Jack Wyndham."

"I swear I wouldn't! Straton, can't you believe me? Won't you give me a chance?" she besought him desperately, abasing herself utterly in the bitter agony of the moment. "Ah, don't you care at all—any longer?"

"Care!" he said hoarsely, shaken suddenly out of his enforced composure by the pitiful beauty of her as she stood there in the moonlight, supplicating him. "I care so much that it's torture to be near you and not touch you—so much that these last two months away from you have been hell. And the rest of life without you will be hell. . . . God!——" He broke off violently, his hands clenched.

Timidly she drew a little nearer to him.

"Then, if you care like that, can't you forgive me—take me back—Straton?" Her voice was wrung, piteously imploring. But he had got himself in hand again and it failed to move him.

"No," he said sternly. "I can't. Have you forgotten that Jack's death lies at your door? How much must he have suffered, what torment drove him, till he took that way out of life? Could I make any woman my wife if doing so meant stepping across the dead body of my friend?" He passed his hand wearily across his forehead. "And even if Jack were still alive, I wouldn't marry you. I love you still—that's true, but something's gone out of my love which will never come back again—something that was faith and trust—the very heart and core of love. And a man must look up, not down, to the woman he loves."

"Then—then it's all over, finished?" she said desperately. "Straton, think again! I sinned before I knew

you—it was against Jack I sinned. For you, I'd try to be different—try to be the kind of woman you want. . . . I know I'm not that, now—you've shown me what you think of me." She threw out her hands appealingly. "But, at least, there's some excuse to be made for me. You know the sort of bringing-up I've had"—bitterly. "I've never had a chance—not a real chance——" She broke off with a strangled sob.

For a moment the man's hard grey eyes softened. There was so much of truth in what she said. Was Lady Farnby, sharp-tongued, self-seeking old woman that she was, the type to help a girl to find or keep ideals? And he knew, too, the story of Iris's mother—everyone knew it. She had never loved her husband. She had married him for his money and, when he lost it, she coolly left him for someone else, whose money-bags were even deeper than Lethbridge's had been, and whom she had married as soon as the law allowed her to. The taint of infidelity was in Iris's very blood.

When at last Quayne spoke again, there was a note of deep sadness in his voice.

"You could never be true to any man, Iris," he said.

"I could—to you."

He shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "But——"

"But it's all over," she broke in bitterly. "Finished!"

"Yes, it's all over."

A silence fell between them—between this man and woman who loved so much and who were yet, by the man's inexorable decision, set apart for ever. It was Iris who broke it.

"Straton, will you kiss me"—her voice shook—"just once—before you go?"

For an instant it seemed almost as though he were about to refuse, resisting the hyacinth-blue eyes lifted imploringly to his, the tremulous appeal in the sweet, jangled voice. But it was only for an instant. With a swift, irresistible movement he snatched her up into his arms and his mouth crushed down on hers, kissing her with all the aching, desperate passion of a man who knows that it is for the last time he will hold the woman he loves in his arms, the last time their lips will ever meet. Then abruptly he set her down, and as he strode away from her and was lost to sight amid the black shadows, she slid helplessly to her knees and leaned in a little crumpled heap against the stone balustrade, her hands clinging to the coping.

CHAPTER III

AN INVITATION

"DAMN!"

Quayne, cautiously feeling his way through a dense November fog, collided suddenly against something hard and unyielding. He had been dining out at a friend's flat, and when he had left there only a light, yellowish mist veiled the street. But, as is the way of a London fog, it had thickened with such surprising rapidity that twenty minutes' walking had brought him into abrupt encounter with some iron railings.

He drew back, rubbing his shoulder rather ruefully, and tried to make out his whereabouts, but found himself totally at a loss. It was impossible to see two feet in front of him. Muffled shouts and the perpetual hooting of horns came from some distant roadway, where motor-buses and cars were wedged one against the other, for the most part at a standstill, but occasionally progressing a few yards at a snail's pace. Now and again the figure of a passer-by loomed out of the fog for an instant, only to vanish into it once more, silently, like some shadowy ghost.

Quayne's ejaculation as he brought up sharply against the railings had been brief but very audible. It produced an unexpected response.

"Oh, is someone there?"

It was a woman's voice that came to him through the

fog—a young voice with a little breathless catch of nervousness in it. He faced round in the direction from which it seemed to come.

"Yes," he replied quietly, but loudly enough for his answer to carry through the curtain of fog. "Can I help you?"

As he spoke, a dim figure emerged hesitatingly out of the swathing mist—a slight, girlish figure with groping, outstretched hands.

"See, I'm here—this way," said Quayne, and, taking one of the outstretched hands in his, he drew the girl to his side.

"Oh—oh, thank you," she gasped, releasing herself hastily. "Please, do you know—can you tell me where we are?"

He laughed.

"That's just exactly what I'm afraid I *can't* tell you," he answered. "I seem to have lost my bearings entirely."

"Ah!" There was a world of disappointment in the girl's soft voice. "I had so hoped you could direct me."

Quayne peered down at her. All he could discern with any certainty was that she was very slight and not quite as high as his shoulder.

"It seems, then, that we're both of us lost," he said. "Don't you think we had better join forces and try and find our way together?"

Followed a pause, as though the girl were considering the proposition.

"You'd better," he went on. "You're too—too young to be out alone in this infernal fog."

A low amused laugh came in response. There was something particularly attractive about it, he thought.

"I'm sure you can't tell my age in this Egyptian dark-

ness," she answered. "And I'm quite used to being out alone—though I've no special predilection for being out in a fog, I must confess."

"Then come with me," he urged. "I'll see you into safety somehow, I promise you."

"It's very kind of you," she said frankly. "I'd really be very grateful to you."

"Right, then. See, d'you mind taking my arm?"

But she shook her head.

"Oh, there's no need for that, thanks," she replied hastily.

Quayne felt himself colouring. The frankness with which she had accepted the offer of his escort had been replaced by such a sudden, unmistakable note of distrust. He felt unreasonably annoyed with her.

"Well, perhaps you don't mind telling me where you want to get to," he said bluntly. "I'm afraid I can't be of much help to you unless you'll do that."

Again that quiet, amused little laugh of hers.

"No, of course you can't, can you? I'm trying to get to Chelsea."

"All right. Of one thing I *am* sure, you're hopelessly out of your way. What you've done, you know, is to wander into one or other of these confounded squares, right off the main street. Let's go ahead till we find some place we can identify."

She assented, and then set off side by side, occasionally exchanging a few words as they went. Then, all at once, there was the sound of quick steps and hurried breathing. Someone came towards them at a run and collided violently with the girl at Quayne's side, sending her staggering backwards over the kerb, to fall headlong into the roadway. Simultaneously the two big headlights of a

car gleamed suddenly out of the darkness, like baleful eyes seeking their prey, and, in the confusing white glare thrown back by the surrounding fog, Quayne could just discern the girl's slight form, prone in front of the car itself. Came a hoarse shout and the piercing hoot of a horn, and, in the same instant, he made a dive forward and snatched her up into his arms. It was like the swoop of an eagle, triumphantly swift and unerring.

. . . The car had passed on, lost once more in the prevailing gloom, and Quayne set the girl on her feet beside him, steadying her with an arm round her shoulders.

"Are you hurt?" he demanded sharply.

"No," she said. "Only"—with an uncertain little laugh—"rather shaken up."

"Well, you'd better be thankful you're not dead," he returned. "Perhaps you'll take my arm, now, and not be a fool."

Somewhat meekly she obeyed, and once more they trudged slowly along the dripping pavement, this time in complete silence.

"Thank you for—for picking me up," she said, after a while, in a rather small voice.

"Don't mention it," he replied sarcastically. "That's the kind of thing that adds a pleasant zest to being out in a fog."

She was silent, although under cover of the darkness a fugitive smile tilted the corners of her mouth. He was so like a sulky little boy, she reflected.

"Well, one doesn't expect to meet people *running* about in a fog," she expostulated. "It—it isn't usual, you know."

"I expect you'd run," he returned, "if you'd just

pinched someone's bag or watch, and the owner spotted it and tried to catch you."

"Do you think that's what had happened?" she asked with interest.

"Something of the kind, probably. As you say, people don't usually attempt rapid progress in a fog—unless they've some excellent reason."

The sound of slow-moving vehicles, the jar of brakes and hooting of cars was growing louder.

"We must be getting near one of the main streets now," remarked Quayne. "Though goodness knows which!"

A minute or two later they rounded a corner and emerged into a street where the blurred lights of the traffic gleamed palely at them as they passed. Suddenly Quayne glanced upward at an array of brilliant bulbs outlining the glass portico which sheltered a short flight of steps.

"I know where we are!" he exclaimed. "This is the Café du Chat Noir."

He looked down curiously at his companion. In the flare of the manifold lights, piercing even the thick curtain of the fog, he was able to get a glimpse of her for the first time. Slight almost to thinness, with a pointed, eager little face, a curving mouth that held more than a hint of obstinacy, and charming eyes—eyes of real gentian blue. All this he noted in a keen, sweeping glance.

"Look here," he said suddenly. "It's no use wandering about these streets any longer in this fog. You're miles from Chelsea, and I'm far enough away from my flat. Suppose we go in and have some supper here?"

She hesitated.

"Please come," he urged. His manner had changed

extraordinarily. The bearishness had gone out of his tones and they held something of the eagerness of a boy. To his own inward astonishment he was conscious of a keen anxiety that she should say "yes" to his suggestion. "Do come," he said again. "Because if you won't, you see, I shan't be able to, either. And I'm literally starving," he added mendaciously.

"But I'm not in evening dress," she objected.

He swept the protest airly aside.

"That doesn't matter. We'll go upstairs—you're not bound to be in evening kit up on the balcony. Come along. Having just escaped death at the wheels of a car, you're merely courting an early demise from pneumonia by standing here arguing. And I shall have had all the trouble of saving your life for no good purpose!"

She laughed—that little sudden laugh of hers with its ring of genuine humour which he had found so attractive before.

"If you put it that way, you leave me no choice," she said. "I can't let your life-saving propensities be wasted like that, can I? Very well, I'll accept your kind invitation with pleasure."

"Then that's settled. Let's go in."

He piloted her up the steps, and a minute later the big glass doors of the restaurant swung open to admit them.

CHAPTER IV

AT THE CHAT NOIR

THE interior of the Chat Noir presented a sharp contrast to the gloom without. It was brilliantly lit up, a jazz band crashed out the latest fox-trot, and, since people had made their way to the restaurant long before the curtain of dense fog descended, the tables were as crowded as usual.

From her seat at the balcony table which Quayne had secured his unknown guest peered down upon the couples thronging the dancing floor, while Straton himself, from behind the menu which he was supposedly perusing, watched her with keen eyes, trained to observe. She had taken off her hat, revealing black, shingled hair, as smooth and satiny as a raven's wing. It was rather a charming head, he reflected, and the long, narrow black brows and short dark lashes gave a peculiar vividness and depth of colour to the eyes. The face was decidedly too thin, almost pinched-looking, and something in the brilliance of those same eyes and in the oddly determined mouth conveyed a slight impression of strain. That the girl was hard-up, Straton felt convinced. The little black frock she was wearing had long since seen its best days, while the gloves which she had on the table beside her, together with a rather shabby wrist-bag, were neatly darned in more than one place.

"Hungry?" queried Straton.

An odd expression came into her eyes—half ironical, half eager.

"Oh, fairly," she answered indifferently. "Aren't you?"

"I told you I was famishing," he said quickly. "Well, now, let's choose. What shall we have? Oysters?"

She made a small grimace of distaste.

"You have oysters—men always like them."

"And don't you?"

She shook her head.

"I much prefer the humble sardine."

"Very well, then—*hors d'œuvres* for you. Waiter!" A waiter flew to his side; obviously he was a well-known client of the Chat Noir. "Oysters and *hors d'œuvres*. What will you have next?" Quayne held out the menu, but she gestured it away.

"Oh, anything. You choose."

So he chose—an excellent little supper betraying both a discriminating taste and a total indifference as to cost, and the waiter scurried away with the order. But it was some time before the first course materialised, and Quayne noticed that the faint colour in the girl's face was growing fainter. All at once, with a little caught breath like a sigh, her eyes closed and she slipped sideways in her chair, and would have fallen but that he sprang up just in time to support her with a hasty arm thrown round her. For a moment her head rested against his shoulder, then she opened her eyes and regarded him with a puzzled expression.

"Where am I?" she murmured.

"You're quite all right," he said. "You—you fainted, I think." Meanwhile a waiter, obeying a sharply uttered

order, approached with a carafe of water. "Here, drink this," he went on, pouring some into a glass.

She obeyed, sipping it slowly.

"I didn't faint," she said. "The—the room went round for a moment—that was all." She lifted her head from his shoulder and he withdrew his arm instantly. "It was the heat of the restaurant, I think," she added, contriving a small smile.

"How long is it since you last fed?" he demanded.

"Well"—the familiar little gleam of amusement twinkled faintly in her eyes. "It's some time since dinner, isn't it?"

In his own mind Quayne was perfectly sure that the girl was faint from actual hunger, and he was conscious of a flash of admiration for the plucky way in which she was trying to carry it off.

"Yes, it is," he agreed. "But I'm going to revise your menu. No *hors d'œuvres,* for instance, but a cup of good hot soup is what you want to start with. That fog was a cold, clammy affair and you need warming up."

"Yes—that's it," she assented eagerly. "I was cold—and then the heat of the room——"

"I know." He nodded reassuringly. "You'll be all right in a few minutes."

When the soup came he watched her unobtrusively. Yes, he was right—she was really hungry. All her pride could not conceal the fact when the steaming cup of soup, accompanied by a crisp roll, was set in front of her. She drank it ravenously. In the same way she devoured the sole which followed, and it was not until a delicately browned partridge superseded the sole that she seemed to become suddenly conscious of the fact. She laid down her knife and fork abruptly.

"I *am* being a pig," she said frankly. "I've just been eating and drinking and hardly speaking—like some horrid old gentleman. I'm afraid"—repentantly—"my manners are very bad."

Quayne smiled.

"Take another drink of champagne," he replied quietly, "and then we'll talk. Partridge lends itself to discussion."

She laughed, and lifting her glass, made him a mischievous little bow. It was astonishing the difference which the food and wine had made in her. Her face had lost the pinched, almost drawn look he had observed in it earlier on, and she had recovered her poise—that half defiant, half gallant boyish poise which had first attracted him when they foregathered in the fog and which seemed characteristic of her.

"To my host," she said gaily, as she drank. "Here's lots of luck!"

His face darkened suddenly. Into the deep-set eyes came a look of quiet irony.

"I'm afraid it's too late in the day to wish me that," he said shortly.

She set down her glass.

"But why ever?" she asked in surprise. "You're not old."

"I'm thirty-two."

"Well?"—inquiringly.

"'Well'?" he repeated, with a faint smile. "Sometimes thirty-two sees you through all the luck you're going to get."

She consumed two or three wafer-thin potato chips in meditative silence.

"Oh, I see," she said at last. "You're what's called a cynic, I suppose."

"I suppose I am. I've good reason to be."

She glanced up quickly, and an imp of mischief danced between the double line of her short black lashes.

"Did she turn you down?"

"You little devil!" exclaimed Quayne, startled. Adding, after a moment: "No, she did *not* turn me down."

"Oh"—cheerfully. "Then there's still hope." She looked across at him with the utmost friendliness. "Try her again. Most women say 'no' the first time—but they don't mean it."

A flash of amusement crossed his face.

"How many years has it taken you to acquire that piece of worldly knowledge?" he asked.

"Eighteen," she answered seriously.

"Then it's a mature judgment," he commented.

She laughed.

"I know eighteen must seem horribly young to you, but one learns quite a lot, even by then—if you've got to."

"So if you said 'no,' you wouldn't mean it—the first time?"

"Oh, *I* should"—very hastily. "I don't want to marry—ever."

Once again she had succeeded in startling him.

"You don't want to? Why not?"

"Because I want to paint."

He suppressed a smile. She seemed such a child to be sweeping away every other possibility with that determined "I want to paint." Probably she had some sort of amateurish gift and imagined herself a budding genius.

"But, you know," he said gently, "you have to be very

good indeed to make a success as an artist. Are you sure you're good enough?"

"Félix Oudin thought I was," she answered quietly.

Félix Oudin! It was a name to conjure with—Quayne knew it well. Oudin had been a very famous old French artist, admission to whose studio as a pupil had been the aim and object of numberless ambitious young painters until the day of his sudden and unexpected death about six months previously.

"Félix Oudin?" repeated Quayne, surprised. "Then you must certainly be 'worth while,' as they say. Oudin wasn't addicted to bestowing encouragement over freely."

"No," she agreed, with a reminiscent smile. "He wasn't."

"Did you know him well?"

"I owe him everything," she answered simply. "You see, we lived in Paris, and we were very poor, father and I. At least, we were very poor sometimes, though we had our wealthy moments——" She paused, hesitating.

"Go on," said Quayne encouragingly. "Tell me." There was something curiously compelling in the sympathy that underlay his tones, and after a pause she continued.

"It was like this," she said. "Father was an artist, too—he'd real genius. But after mother died—I was only six, then—he simply didn't care any more about anything. And he—he drank." Her voice dropped, and in the sudden little anxious lines that the mere memory brought to her face Quayne could read the tragedy of childhood which lay behind that brief, unvarnished statement. "Sometimes he painted—splendidly," she went on. "And when he sold one of his pictures we always had a topping time. He'd often buy me a new hat or

frock—that was when I was older, of course—'to commemorate the occasion,' he used to say. And then we'd go out and dine at a really good restaurant—like this one"—looking round her appreciatively. "But he always drank the money away in a few days, and then"—laughing a little—"the new hat or frock went to join all the other things at the pawn-shop."

Quayne vented an exclamation of disgust, but she checked him with a small, imploring gesture.

"He couldn't help it," she said. "He missed mother so, you see. He used to be ever so gay and amusing, just for me. We had lots of fun together. But I knew that inside he was really dreadfully unhappy without her. And he always played so fair! If we'd only got a single sausage in the house—or rather, in our rooms, for we never ran to a whole house!—he'd insist on my having the biggest share of it, because, he said, I was growing up and needed it more than he did . . . And then one day he caught cold—he'd pawned his overcoat, because we were *very* poor just then. It turned to pneumonia and—and he died."

Her eyes had grown a trifle misty at the remembrance. It was obvious to Quayne that she had been very devoted to this lovable, gifted, but hopelessly weak father of hers. He stretched his hand out to her across the table and she took it frankly, giving it a small friendly squeeze, as though thanking him for his silent sympathy. It flashed suddenly into his mind how great was the gulf which existed between Iris Lethbridge, untrue and selfish to the core of her, and this half-child, half-woman with her spontaneous sincerity and simple acceptance of the hardships which had fallen to her lot.

"And then?" he said gently. "What happened after that?"

"Félix Oudin," she answered, nodding. "Father had been a pupil of his, you know, years before, and I often used to go to his studio. Sometimes I sat for him as a model, and sometimes he'd give me an easel and let me draw or paint with the other students—and criticise my work just as if I were a real student. He sent for me when father died and told me he'd train me entirely, if I liked. I've always remembered what he said. *'Mon enfant,* thou hast talent—perhaps more than talent. Shall we see, thou and I together, if thou hast that little more than talent that makes a creative artist out of a good workman?' . . . He took me to live with him in his own home, and I studied under him till he died." Her voice shook uncontrollably, but after a moment she steadied it again and went on. "Even then he hadn't forgotten me. He left me a little money, just enough to start on. So I came to England —I couldn't bear Paris any longer—and took a studio in Chelsea. I'd heard it was cheap there. But"—with a little humorous smile—"I don't think your ideas of living cheaply in London are the same as ours in Paris."

"And have you sold any pictures since you came here?" asked Quayne.

"One or two—small ones. One must not expect too much at first. But of course I *shall* sell some more."

By this time the waiter had brought coffee, and as she helped herself to a cigarette from Quayne's proffered case she adroitly turned the conversation. It was obvious she was not going to confide in him the state of her finances, though he could make a shrewd guess that they were at a low ebb. He liked her pluck

and the jaunty way in which she faced what must be a most uncertain future. If her small craft foundered, amid the sea of inevitable competition, he could imagine her going down with her flag still flying. But somehow he did not want that to happen. It was quite extraordinary how concerned he felt over the matter, although, following her lead, he allowed the conversation to drift into another channel.

Presently he observed that the crowd in the restaurant below was thinning.

"The fog must have lifted," he said. "People are going home."

She nodded.

"Yes. It looks as if we could each get to our respective destinations now."

"Let's go down and investigate. If the fog's cleared off, I'll put you into a taxi."

It was as they thought. The fog had completely cleared, and cars and taxis were scurrying away in every direction. Quayne hailed one of the latter and had just helped his companion into it, when she uttered a cry of dismay.

"Oh! I've left my gloves on the table where we dined!"

"All right, I'll get them for you," he said reassuringly.

As soon as he had gone on his errand she turned quickly to the cabman and directed him where to drive, and when Quayne returned, carrying the recovered gloves in his hand, she was already seated in the taxi.

She leaned out of the window to shake hands.

"Good-bye," she said. "And thank you so much for—for everything."

His hand closed round hers in a sudden tense grip.

"It's not going to be really good-bye," he said quickly.

A moment later the taxi started with a jerk, and as it slipped swiftly along the lamp-lit street, he suddenly realised that the little artist girl had gone and that he knew neither her name nor her address. He made an impulsive step in pursuit of the taxi, then, recognising the utter uselessness of trying to overtake it, he stood still, watching it speed rapidly away until it turned the corner of the street and was lost to sight.

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER I

"THE UNCOUNTED THIRD"

BESIDES, who on earth wants the portrait of an old woman?"

The argument as to whether Lady Susan Brabazon should have her portrait painted or not had been raging furiously all through breakfast, and she finally fired off the foregoing question at her husband with the triumphant air of one who feels she has scored an unanswerable point.

Sir Philip looked across at her—at the keen, vivacious face with its whimsical arched brows, dark as the humorous eyes beneath them, at the fine-shaped head with its thick, waving grey hair, at the alert, upright figure—and smiled covertly. No one ever thought of Lady Susan as "old," although her sixth decade loomed ahead in the not very far distant future. There was something so essentially vital about her—some quality of inherent youth.

"Old? Pooh!" he retorted explosively. "You're a damn sight younger than most of the flappers of the present day. Half of 'em are blasé before they're out of their teens. You'll never be that. Anyway, *I* want the picture, so you might as well let me have my own way. I very rarely do get it."

"You did once."

He knew to what she was referring—to her final sur-

render after nearly half a lifetime spent in refusing to marry him. It had been very characteristic of her, that surrender. The girl whom she had grown to regard practically in the light of a daughter, and Sir Philip's only nephew, who had lived with him from childhood, had each married, and in the bereft months which followed she had yielded to his plea of utter loneliness.

"I'm lonely, too," she had snapped at him. "You've not got the monopoly."

"No one has," he had answered. And something in the quiet response, something that no longer held revolt but only an inflexible endurance and acceptance of the "must be" of fate, had suddenly touched her to the quick, showing her his whole life barren because of his utter faithfulness to her—to the love of his youth. She held out an impulsive hand.

"Then let's be lonely together, my dear," she had said. "After all, it would be much more companionable. Only," she added, whimsically, after a pause, "I refuse to be separated from the Tribes of Israel."

The latter was the generic name applied to the heterogeneous collection of dogs of all sizes and breeds, from mongrel to prize-winner, with which Lady Susan loved to surround herself. And Sir Philip, who simply detested a dog about the house, had smiled ruefully under his bristling grey moustache and responded:

"Bring 'em along with you, then. There's room for them all at Lorne."

So now the little phrase which Lady Susan flung at him came charged with memories, bringing a sudden queer softening into his fierce old eyes—"You did once."

"After thirty years," he answered. "We missed a lot, thanks to your confounded obstinacy, Susan."

"A lot of disagreeables, probably," retorted Lady Susan. "We shan't live long enough, now, to get into the Divorce Courts."

Sir Philip gathered up his morning's mail and, rising from the table, stalked across to the fireplace where, although it was the month of May, a small, bright fire burned cheerily. He was a tall, aristocratic-looking old man, with fierce, pent-house brows and a nose like the beak of an eagle, and a couple of fox-terriers, stretched out on the hearthrug enjoying the fire's warmth, moved respectfully to one side as he approached. They were the only members of the Tribes of Israel who were evet permitted to accompany their mistress to the Brabazon town house in Audley Square—the rest of their brethren remaining disconsolately down in the country at Lorne—and they seemed to know that the continuation of this privilege depended upon considerate treatment of the master of the house.

"Confound the Divorce Courts," exclaimed Sir Philip, fidgeting testily with the single eyeglass which depended from a broad black ribbon round his neck. "Get back to the picture—you're only trying to side-track it."

Lady Susan smiled.

"Quite unsuccessfully, apparently," she commented.

"Quite. The sole question to settle is who's going to do the job. What about Grimthorp?"—naming one of the best known portrait painters of the moment.

"Certainly not." Lady Susan shook her head decisively. "If I'm to give in over having it done, I'll at least choose who's to do it."

"Who d'you want, then?"

"I'd prefer it done by a woman."

"By a woman! Pshaw! There's no woman portrait painter worth the name."

"Oh, yes, there is."

"Then there shouldn't be. Women have no business with professions. Home and babies is their job."

"My dear soul"—Lady Susan beamed at him. "You've the most antedeluvian ideas of any man I ever met. Also the most unpractical."

"Unpractical? Unpractical?" he barked. "What d'you mean by unpractical?"

"Why, as there are so many more women than men since the war, how on earth do you propose to supply them all with homes and babies—at least, babies that aren't improper?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Susan."

"I'm not. And the other women—the surplus ones—have got to live—and earn the money to do it on. That's why I say I'll have my portrait painted by a woman."

"Well, who's it going to be then?"

"There's a young woman in whom I'm very much interested. Her name's Jill Wedderburn, and people are talking about her quite a lot."

"Met her?"

She shook her head.

"No. But she's got a picture in this year's Academy."

Sir Philip positively snorted.

"And do you call that a recommendation, may I ask?"

"In this case, yes. I've seen the picture—and whoever painted it has both imagination and insight."

"Well"—crustily. "I don't want any imagination about your portrait."

"Oh, don't be so silly and argumentative, Philip.

Straton Quayne's seen the picture and was immensely struck by it. And you know he's critical enough!"

"Humph! What's it like?"

"It's called 'The Uncounted Third'—a picture of a man and two women, and everybody's asking which *is* the uncounted third—the wife or the other woman."

Lady Susan felt conscious that her description of the picture sounded woefully bald and inadequate yet she remembered well how long she herself, in common with a good many other peolpe, had stood in front of it, puzzling over the human problem it presented and impressed by the sense of tragedy conveyed.

It was a large canvas, showing the interior of a lighted and luxurious room. A beautiful woman in evening dress was seated near the fire which burned in the grate, and opposite her stood a man, obviously her husband. Somehow the artist had managed to convey the fact that the latter had just sprung up quickly from his chair. A newspaper, as though hastily thrown down, lay on the floor beside it, while the cushions had tumbled forward on to the seat. Both the man and the woman were looking towards the doorway, where stood another woman, one hand gripping the framework of the door, her sombre outdoor garments contrasting curiously with the evening dress of the two other figures in the picture.

The expression on the man's face was one of direst dismay. Manifestly, that these two women should have met was the last thing in life he wished. But the expressions of the women themselves were less easily interpreted although they bore a curious similarity. In either face was a look of surprise and complete nonrecognition as they stared across the room at each other—a look which indicated that neither had had

any previous knowledge of the other's existence. But beyond that there was something deeper—a horrified, inimical recognition of the fact that each of them had had her share in the man's life. But which of the two was the one who counted most—whether the wife, or that other woman standing on the threshold of the room—it was impossible to say. Neither the man's face nor his attitude supplied any clue. It showed only his utter consternation that the two should have met. And the problem which intrigued half London, occasioning hot argument, was which was "The Uncounted Third." Which of the two was the woman the man really loved, and which the one who only believed herself loved, but actually counted for nothing in his life?

"I can't describe it to you properly," continued Lady Susan. "You must go and see it for yourself, Philip."

"Very well, I will," he returned grimly. "I've no intention of letting anyone paint your portrait until I've seen some of their work."

Lady Susan nodded contentedly.

"You'll be satisfied with Miss Wedderburn all right," she assured him. "And meanwhile, I'm going to make her acquaintance."

"Do you know her address?"

"Yes. Hazel Kenyon is a friend of hers, it seems."

"Hazel Kenyon?"

"The shorthand-typist who comes to do my letters in the mornings. You met her the other day in the hall."

"Oh! Ah, yes, I remember. Quiet little brown-haired thing, eh?"

"Not so very little—she's fairly tall. But the other two adjectives apply. Anyway, she's got all her wits about her. It was Straton who sent her to me. She's

working for him the rest of the day now—his own secretary is ill."

"Then I suppose the truth of the matter is that Quayne's met the other girl—the artist one, I mean—taken a fancy to her because she's pretty or something, and is trying to get her the job of painting your portrait," said Sir Philip irascibly. "That's the long and short of it."

Lady Susan looked amused.

"Straton hasn't met her, as a matter of fact," she returned. "But even if he had, there'd be no question of his 'taking a fancy' to the girl. I've known him fairly well for the last two years—ever since"—with a disarming smile—"you badgered me into marrying you—and I've never seen a man take less interest in women. He's entirely absorbed in writing books, and I don't believe he ever even notices whether a woman is pretty or plain. If he did, he'd have lost his heart long ago to his next-door neighbour."

"His next-door neighbour? How do you know who his next-door neighbour is? Man-like, Sir Philip's thoughts, definitely fixed at the moment upon a London *milieu,* had not flown off at a tangent, like his wife's.

"Oh, I mean down at home," she explained. "At Doon St. Frances. Lady Farnby—horrible old woman!—is his nearest neighbour, and her niece is the loveliest thing imaginable."

"I see. You mean, he might have fallen in love with Iris Lethbridge?" said Sir Philip, labouring slowly along in the wake of his wife's quicksilver brain.

"Of course. Most men would—and do! Why, I've been told that one man—I forget his name—committed

suicide because she wouldn't marry him. She seems to have a positive genius for breaking hearts."

"More shame to her, then, the baggage!" growled Sir Philip. "Women like that should be drowned at birth."

Lady Susan laughed.

"They're as they are made," she objected tolerantly. "One woman can no more help being a magnet than another can help her total inability to send a man's temperature up by a single degree. And Iris Lethbridge could get away with any man—except a piece of reinforced concrete like Straton Quayne. I can't think," she added reflectively, "how such a detestable old woman ever came to have anything so charming as that great-niece of hers. I'm not usually of an unfriendly disposition, but if there's one person in the world that I really can't stand, it's Lady Farnby, and I'm only thankful that Lorne is a good three miles from the Chace. I'd hate to live any nearer to her."

"You're a difficult woman, Susan," commented Sir Philip.

"Well, anyway, it's better to be difficult than dull. And at least you can't accuse me of that."

He tugged at his moustache and beneath it a grim smile of amusement twisted his lips.

"No, my dear," he replied. "I shall never accuse you of that."

Lady Susan smiled up at him.

"And now, just to prove to you that I'm not always even difficult, all I want you to do is to put on your hat and trot along to the Academy and have a look at 'The Uncounted Third.' "

"Why not come with me?" he suggested.

"No. I propose to descend upon Miss Wedderburn in her studio. I'll walk, and take the Tribes with me. What do you say to that, my children?" she added, addressing the two terriers who lay in front of the fire with brown eyes watchfully fixed upon her, tails thudding hopefully on the hearth-rug. They had heard the word "walk," and the instant she turned to them they leapt up, barking riotously, and regardless of a few muttered expletives from Sir Philip, brushed unheedingly past his august legs and escorted Lady Susan triumphantly out of the room.

CHAPTER II

JILL

"OH, for goodness' sake, keep still, Garry!" As she spoke, Jill Wedderburn, perched on the top of a tall stool in front of her easel, gave a vicious kick to the wooden rung upon which her feet were resting.

Opposite her, upon a raised platform, a man was sitting negligently on the edge of a table, legs dangling, cigarette in hand, and in the bright north light of the studio his face showed clean-cut as a cameo—a dark, eager face with brown-grey eyes which held more than a a spice of deviltry in them, and a mobile mouth that predicated a curious admixture of humour and passion. Jill's glance rested upon him with a kind of irritated indulgence.

"You're the worst model I've ever had in my life," she affirmed.

"But do remember that I'm only sitting for you 'to oblige,' as the charlady says," he deprecated. "I'm not a model by profession."

"Are you—anything—'by profession'?" she retaliated, a shade of disapproval in her eyes. "You paint a bit, play and sing a bit, scribble a bit, and dance a bit."

"Jack of all trades and master of none, in fact?" he replied amicably.

She nodded.

"That's about it. You're an awful fool, you know, Garry."

"If you mean, about you," he answered, "I certainly am." A sudden fire lit itself in his eyes as he spoke, and Jill turned hastily back to her easel and with clever, unerring strokes devoted her attention to bringing out the lights and shades of his brown, crinkly hair—hair which no amount of brushing would ever teach to lie flat.

She was used to the sort of undercurrent of love-making which ran through Garry Lester's friendship with her. They had been friends for over two years now, ever since the time when fortune had begun to smile broadly upon her and she had been able to give up the shabby rooms, which were all she had hitherto afforded, and move into her present comparatively palatial quarters in a large block of studio flats.

Lester tenanted the flat above her, and, chancing to descend the staircase at a moment when she was on the landing, hot and flushed with her unavailing attempts to open a heavy packing-case, he had promptly come to the rescue. The packing-case successfully dealt with, he had insisted upon her coming up to his flat for a cup of tea, and had afterwards helped her daily with the unpacking and distribution of her furniture and effects until she was comfortably installed in her new abode.

Upon such a foundation had grown up a comradeship, which, although it had swiftly developed into something much deeper on Garry's part, was still kept nominally running within the banks of friendship by the fact that Garry himself hadn't enough money to marry on and that Jill, absorbed in her work as an artist, had

set her face resolutely against the very idea of matrimony.

Had it been otherwise, she might not have been altogether proof against a certain indefinable charm which was undoubtedly Lester's—that charm which is so often the possession of men and women blessed—or cursed—with the artistic temperament, dowered with many gifts, and yet who seem destined almost by reason of their sheer facility in various directions, to accomplish nothing in particular.

Garry, as he himself had owned, was Jack of all trades and master of none. He could paint above the average, sang delightfully, often improvised brilliantly upon the piano, and he had a perfect genius for dancing. But he had about as much understanding as a butterfly of the sheer concentrated hard work which is necessary to achieve success, and hitherto he had idled happily through his twenty-seven years of life. Unfortunately, a hard-working father had left him just enough money to rub along on, so that he would probably remain a dilettante to the end of his days.

"May I have a rest now, please?" he asked meekly, after watching Jill in silence for a few minutes.

She flung down her brush impatiently. The palette followed, but more heedfully, in consideration of the little gleaming worms of paint which adorned its surface.

"All right," she agreed. "Come and have a look at yourself."

He descended from the platform, stretching his limbs as he came, and approached the easel. But he did not look at the picture which rested upon it. Instead, his eager glance sought Jill's small, dark head, with its

satiny, cropped hair. She looked very young, even for her one-and-twenty years—boyishly slim in her straight green overall, and with a sharply-angled face that was rendered curiously characteristic by very long and narrow brows, black as a crow's feather.

"How d'you think it's going?" she asked, and then, seeing that Garry's gaze was fastened on her instead of upon the picture, she flushed vividly under his scrutiny. "You're not looking at it," she protested sharply.

"No. I'm looking at you. It's more interesting," he returned equably. "Jill, I do think you've the bluest eyes I've ever seen. What do you use for them—indigo blue or ultramarine?"

"Don't be an ultra-idiot," she retorted with great firmness. "But tell me, d'you think I've got the shadow a trifle too heavy—there, just by your right eye?"

He nodded.

"It does look a bit as if I'd been prize-fighting and someone had biffed me one, doesn't it?" he said. And then, suddenly becoming serious, he went on: "I think, as a matter of fact, you've hollowed that temple rather too much. See what I mean? Just here. And here, too, there's something I don't like." With a quick, flexible finger he indicated what he meant. It was this part of him which appealed to her so much—his swift understanding and the unerring critical faculty which he possessed in spite of the fact that his own performance was erratic and uncertain.

Jill made a grab at her palette and brush.

"I see," she said. "You're quite right, Garry. I'll just lighten that shadow a bit and then I think I'll knock off work for the rest of the morning. I've stuck to it pretty hard the last few days."

Garry strolled across to the piano which stood cornerwise at one end of the studio and began playing softly while she painted.

"I've got a new song," he vouchsafed, after a moment. Music by Garry Lester. Like to hear it?"

Jill, momentarily incommoded by two brushes she was holding in her mouth, mumbled an abstracted assent, and he began to sing in a mellow baritone voice that might have earned him quite a good income if he had so chosen.

* "There are many ways of love 'twixt man and maid,
There's the love that flowers in sunshine, dies in shade,
There's a love that for the storm grows all the stronger,
And there's love that in the cold blast lasts no longer—
O there's many ways of love!

"There's a love that wants to conquer and to take,
Reckless though its sheer demand a heart may break,
And there's love that's just a doing and a giving,
Making easy all the loved one's ways of living—
O there's many ways of love!

"But there's sure one way of loving which is fair,
If you give and take alike, and share and share,
Never grudge each other's work, or play, or laughter,
That's a love will last through all your life—and after.
O there's just one way to love!"

"That's exactly it," remarked Jill abruptly, as he ceased singing. With the opening words of the song she had stopped painting and had stood listening, her brush poised in her hand above the canvas, until it was finished.

"What's just it?" asked Garry, slightly bewildered.

"Why, that so few people really know how to play fair in love. That's why I'll never marry. I'm sure a husband would want to interfere with my work—to say nothing of my play or laughter."

* Musical rights reserved.

Garry had risen from the piano and come toward her.

"The song's rot," he said. "At least, most of it. Not one bit, though. Love means 'to conquer and to take.'" His eyes, smoulderingly aglow, met and held hers. "That's true. Some day I shall conquer and take you, Jill."

She drew hastily away from him.

"You never will, Garry," she replied. "So you may as well give up the idea."

"I never give up," he answered quietly. "You'll realise that one day."

Although he spoke so quietly, there was a vibrant undertone in his voice. She had heard it before, and it always frightened her a little, so that she felt thankful when a sudden and unlooked-for interruption came in the form of a brisk knock on the door. She crossed the room to open it, and in rushed a couple of fox-terriers. Behind them sounded a bright, crisp voice, with an underlying note of humour in it.

"Torp! Boggles! Come back! Oh, I must apologise for these two wretched dogs of mine! This is an awful way to introduce myself." The owner of the voice advanced into the room, and held out her hand. "Miss Wedderburn, isn't it? Your front door was unlatched, and as I couldn't make anyone hear, I just walked in. I'm Lady Susan Brabazon, a friend of Hazel Kenyon's, and I want to talk pictures with you, if I may." She looked whimsically across from Jill to Garry, whom the former introduced with a casual, "This is Garry Lester, a friend of mine."

"I'm afraid, though, I'm interrupting," continued

Lady Susan. "I thought I heard some music going on as I was waiting outside the flat door?"

"Oh, I often serenade Jill when she's painting," replied Garry, falling at once to the quizzical twinkle in Lady Susan's eyes. "It helps genius to burn more brightly." As he spoke he stooped to stroke the two terriers, who were nuzzling round him. Dogs invariably made friends with Garry Lester.

Lady Susan laughed.

"I think Miss Wedderburn's genius burns brightly enough without extraneous aid—at least, if 'The Uncounted Third' is any criterion. My dear," she added, turning to Jill in her impulsive, warm-hearted way, with outstretched hands, "I'd like to thank you for that picture. It was wonderful—it set one thinking."

Jill, attracted immediately—like everyone else—by Lady Susan's kindly, vivid personality, squeezed the out-held hands.

"Thank you!" she said spontaneously, adding "Please sit down, won't you?"

"As a matter of fact, Lady Susan," interpolated Garry, pulling forward a chair, "that picture is the squeezed-out essence of all the cynicism at the bottom of Jill's disbelieving heart."

"Not it," retorted Lady Susan stoutly. "It's just her understanding of the queer muddle we human beings make of life sometimes. My dear, I came to ask if you would paint my portrait—though why you should undertake the portrait of an old woman like me, goodness only knows!"

Jill nodded across at Lester.

"Garry, you clear out," she said good-naturedly.

"That's notice to quit," he returned. "Good-bye, Lady

Susan. Be sure you beat her down in price and don't let her rook you too much over your protrait."

Lady Susan shook hands warmly. She had taken an instant liking to this gay young man with his charming smile and dare-devil eyes. But then, her heart was a capacious one, notwithstanding the sharpness of her tongue, and there was so much of undying youth in her own make-up that youth always appealed to her.

Garry sauntered over to the door, accompanied by Torp and Boggles, who returned disconsolately as it closed behind him.

"Lie down, you two," ordered Lady Susan dispassionately. "I'm going to talk to Miss Wedderburn." And giving up hope of any immediate prospect of a further walk, the two dogs obeyed, establishing themselves as close as possible to the log fire which smouldered on the open hearth. "Don't get your tails burnt," she cautioned, exactly as though she were talking to someone she knew who was standing too near the fire, endangering skirt or trousers. "Now, Miss Wedderburn, my dear," she went on, turning to Jill, "about this wretched portrait of mine. I don't want it done in the very least. Old ladies shouldn't be perpetuated on canvas, in my opinion —but only young and beautiful people."

Jill looked across at her—at the fine-shaped head with its wealth of grey hair, at the whimsical, characteristic face, with all the vitality of a still youthful spirit lighting up the dark, humorous eyes and curving the wide, kindly mouth—and her eyes glowed.

"I'd love to paint you!" she exclaimed. "You'd make a wonderful portrait."

Lady Susan laughed good-humoredly.

"Do you think so?" she said. "Well, that's the idea

my husband has got into his head. So, to please him, I've agreed to have it done. I've displeased him most of his life, so I may as well give in over a little thing like this."

Jill smiled.

"I shouldn't think you could possibly displease—anyone," she ventured shyly.

"You can always displease a man by not wanting to marry him," returned Lady Susan promptly. "They can't understand your being so misguided. It's a relic of the old Adam in them, I suppose. Of course, Eve had no choice, poor thing. Adam was all the men there were, so to speak, and when he proposed she probably accepted him at once because there was nothing else to do. And, ever since, men have been astonished if we don't follow her example."

"I shall never marry—anyone," said Jill quietly.

"Not even that charmingly bad young man who sings to you while you paint?" demanded Lady Susan, twinkling. "I'm sure he wants you to—and I expect he'll rush you into it one day."

Jill flushed a little, but shook her head.

"No," she said confidently, "he won't. No one will."

Lady Susan laughed.

"Wait and see. *I* never meant to marry. I was Susan Hallett in those days, and I loved my freedom. Then it happened that, through marriage, Sir Philip lost his nephew and I lost the girl who had lived with me—also by marriage. That left us both horribly lonely, so we thought we might as well marry each other—after quarrelling over the subject for thirty years! One's never really safe from matrimony this side the grave."

"I am," returned Jill confidently. "My work would

always come first. I love it, you see," she added simply.

"Yes, one can see that, my dear," answered Lady Susan, with quick comprehension. "May I look at some of your pictures?"

Jill nodded and began pulling out first one and then another of her canvases, leaning face to wall, for Lady Susan to see. Some were unfinished, some cruder than others, some mere studies, but each and all evinced that indefinable something which old Félix Oudin had divined in her work—that "little more than talent which makes a creative artist out of a good workman."

"Now, are you very busy just at the moment?" asked Lady Susan, presently, when they had finished discussing the preliminary details of her portrait.

"No," said Jill. "Not for the next two or three weeks, because some of the sitters whose portraits I'm to paint aren't in town yet. Would you like me to begin straight away?"

"What I should like," said Lady Susan, "if you'd agree, is to carry you off to Lorne, our place in Devonshire. I love to get out of town for a little while at this time of year, and we've got a room with an excellent north light which we could rig up for you as a studio—if you will?" she added queryingly.

"'If I will'?" exclaimed Jill joyfully. "Do you know, I've never been to Devonshire? I'd simply love to come —if you'll have me."

"Then that's settled. And Hazel must run down for a week-end while you're with us, so that you don't get bored with only the society of two old cronies like Sir Philip and me."

Jill went off into a trill of laughter.

"I can't imagine anyone getting bored with you!" she

said. "You're—you're such a dear!" she added impulsively.

Lady Susan put her hand under the girl's chin and tilted her head up. With those kindly, understanding eyes of hers she could discern in the thin, sharply-angled young face, with its charming, independent mouth that was both soft and at the same time hard, and in the eager, unsatisfied blue eyes a queer, bitter hunger—the imprint of that something which is lacking to both men and women who have been by fate or circumstance denied real mother-love in childhood and have never found its equivalent in some mother-woman later on in life. Lady Susan felt a sudden tightening of her heart.

"My dear," she said, stooping to kiss the girl's upturned face, "I'm never going to call you Miss Wedderburn. I couldn't. I shall call you Jill."

CHAPTER III

THE BEGINNING OF THE TANGLE

JILL had finished lunch—not the promiscuous, haphazard lunch which one is apt to associate with the artist and Bohemian, but a perfectly normal meal of fried sole and a cutlet, irreproachably grilled by Madelon, her old French *bonne-à-tout-faire*. The latter had been a servant at the *pension* in Paris where Jill and her father had at one time occupied rooms. She had adored Dick Wedderburn, spendthrift and drunkard though he was, and the motherless Jill had been to her as though she were her own child.

When, after Dick's death, Jill had gone to live under the care of Félix Oudin, she had wept inconsolably. She was *désolée*—there was nothing left in life since the inscrutable decrees of a mysterious providence had robbed her of the two people she most loved in the world. So that when Jill's financial position justified her removing into the big studio flat she now occupied, it had occurred to her that Madelon might be willing to come to England and take charge both of her and of the flat.

Accordingly, she had written to the old address in Paris, although feeling somewhat doubtful as to whether Madelon were still to be found there, to learn that she was on the point of leaving and that nothing would give her greater joy than to come to England and look after her adored *petite mademoiselle*. And it was thanks to her

"looking after" that Jill fared sumptuously on sole and cutlet, and was now seated in front of the studio fire with a cup of excellent black coffee by her side.

A Persian cat shared the hearth with her—bigger than most cats, with a huge ruff round his neck and a pair of tigerish topaz eyes that bespoke some intermingling of a wilder strain. He went by the name of Omar, because, as Jill used to explain to her friends, he had all the old Persian tent-maker's love of the good things of this life and was just as much a cynic. Unlike his namesake, however, he had only one love in his life, and that was Jill herself, whom he worshipped with an almost doglike fidelity. He was curled up at her feet now, his golden eyes fixed solemnly upon her as she lighted a cigarette and blew a trail of lazy smoke into the air.

"Omar, my dear," she addressed him, "I'm glad you went out on business of your own this morning, as two importunate dogs came rushing into the studio, and I'm sure you wouldn't have liked it."

Omar blinked, but preserved an Oriental calm. Probably he knew quite well how he would have dealt with any dog trespassing within the precincts of his studio, had he been on the spot, but considered that since the liberty had been taken during his absence it was of no use lamenting lost opportunities. Nevertheless, the information apparently set him on his guard, for a moment later, when there came a tap at the flat door, he rose and stood listening suspiciously. Jill smiled down at him.

"Make your mind easy, old thing," she said reassuringly. "It's not a strange dog this time."

She crossed the room and, passing through the tiny entrance hall, threw open the door.

"Hazel!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I'm so glad to see

you! I've quite a lot of news for you, and you're just in time for a cup of coffee. Madelon"—she turned to the old Frenchwoman who had come paddling out of the kitchen to answer the door—"bring some more coffee for Miss Kenyon."

"Bien, mademoiselle."

Madelon disappeared once again into her own domain, while Hazel Kenyon followed Jill into the sitting-room. Omar received her with marks of evident approbation, purring and rubbing his sleek body against her. He was an odd creature, with certain very definite likes and dislikes, and Hazel was one amongst Jill's friends of whom he condescended to approve. She was attractive in a quiet, unobtrusive way—brown-haired and brown-eyed, and there was a certain shy charm in the smile with which she returned Jill's greeting.

"What's your news, then?" she asked.

"Why, I've had a visitor this morning—Lady Susan Brabazon."

"Lady Susan? Is she going to have her portrait painted, then, after all?"

Jill nodded.

"Yes. Why 'after all'?"

Hazel laughed—a pleasant, tranquil laugh that seemed somehow typical of her.

"Because she and Sir Philip have been quarrelling violently about it. He's a regular old firebrand and martinet and 'master of his own house,' so to speak, all rolled into one. And Lady Susan is so splendid with him! She just laughs at him when he fumes and pokes fun at him—and gets her own way. She's given in over having her portrait done because it's something that will make him happy. And actually, you know, although they

would neither of them acknowledge it, they are a couple of romantic old darlings and absurdly in love with each other."

"She's a great dear," agreed Jill. "Is the nephew, the one you told me about, anything like her?"

"Brett Forrester, you mean?" If there was a slight change in Hazel's voice as she uttered the name, Jill failed to notice it. She was busying herself at the moment pouring out the fresh coffee which Madelon had just brought in. "Oh, no, Mr. Forrester isn't a bit like Lady Susan. I've only met him once or twice, you know. He comes to see her now and then—dashes in and dashes out again. Mostly, I think, he's yachting at this time of year."

"And why aren't you working to-day?" asked Jill. "I thought Mr. Quayne always kept you occupied all afternoon."

"He does, as a rule, but he's gone out of town for the day, so I'm getting a holiday. Mother and I were so pleased to have the day together. But I thought I'd run round to see you while she was resting."

A faint wistfulness came into Jill's eyes. She knew so well the almost perfect understanding which existed between Hazel and her mother. A fragile little person who looked as though she could hardly stand up against a breath of wind, Mrs. Kenyon had been left a widow when Hazel was barely fourteen—left to face the world with only the most microscopic of pensions. And very gallantly she had faced it. By hard and unremitting toil she had added sufficient to her income to give Hazel a decent education and, later on, a thorough secretarial training. Then, as though her work were finished, she

had collapsed, only, it seemed, retaining her hold on life by sheer reason of her love for her child.

It was as if she had passed over the twisted skein of life into younger and stronger hands, and Hazel had responded to the call as splendidly as her mother had done in earlier days. She had taken firm hold of the threads, and now she, in her turn, had become the bread-winner.

All this Jill knew, and the devotion which existed between Hazel and the frail little mother at home appeared to her something very wonderful, almost sacred, the thing she herself had missed in life.

"You and your mother are awfully happy together," she said, rather quietly.

Hazel's eyes glowed softly.

"Yes," she answered simply. "Mother's always at the back of everything, as it were."

A brief silence fell between them, and Omar, as though he sensed something troubling his adored mistress, clambered up on to Jill's knee and established himself there, rubbing his head rhythmically against her shoulder. She sat stroking his sleek back thoughtfully for a few minutes, staring into the fire, while her cigarette smouldered down to a mere stub. Presently she tossed it into the flames, and in some curious way the gesture conveyed the impression that she was throwing from her something of more moment than a cigarette-end. Then, with steady fingers, she lit another cigarette and turned once more to Hazel.

"I'm not going to paint Lady Susan's portrait here," she remarked abruptly, as though intentionally sheering away from the last subject. "I'm to go down to Lorne to do it."

Hazel looked interested.

"Are you really?" she said. "Then you're in luck. I believe it's the most lovely old place. I'll tell you whom you'll probably meet there," she added, "and that's Mr. Quayne."

"*Your* Mr. Quayne, do you mean—the author-man?"

The other nodded.

"Yes. He's just finished the new novel he's been writing, and he's going down to Doon St. Frances for a week or two's rest. Don't you remember—I told you the other day—when we were talking about him—that he had a place there, called Quayling."

"I remember, now. I should love to meet him. I always love people who *do* things. That's why I get so cross with Garry——"

"May I come in? And why do you get so cross with Garry?" demanded a gay voice, as Lester himself pushed open the sitting-room door, which Madelon happened to have left ajar, and paused on the threshold of the room. "*May* I come in?" he repeated.

Jill laughed good-humouredly, soothing Omar, who had bristled up at his entrance, with a tranquil hand.

"It's not much use asking that, is it, when you're in?"

Garry smiled back at her.

"Not much. I really came to hear the result of your interview with that delightful Lady Susan person," he went on, when he had shaken hands with Hazel. "But now, of course, I'm simply perishing with anxiety to know why you get so cross with me."

"There's no need to perish. I get mad with you because you never *do* anything," replied Jill, with candour. "And the result of my interview with Lady Susan is that I'm going to paint her portrait, and I'm to go down to

Lorne to do it, and that there I shall meet a man who really *has* done something."

Lester helped himself to a cigarette from the open box on the table.

"And who may this manly young paragon be," he inquired.

"I've just been telling Jill that she's sure to run into Straton Quayne at Doon St. Frances," volunteered Hazel. "He's going down there about the same time that she'll be staying with Lady Susan."

"Oh!" An odd look came into Garry's eyes. "I've seen him once—he's nothing special to look at. Hullo, Omar's claws. "That brute of yours never likes me, How's the world wagging with you to-day? Plenty of milk and mice in the offing, eh?"

He stooped as though to stroke the animal, but in an instant Omar leapt up like a wild thing and sprang to the floor, where he stood with arched back and furiously waving tail, growling in his throat and glaring at Lester with menacing amber eyes.

"Damn!" ejaculated Garry, shaking his hand, across which a long red scratch witnessed to the sharpness of Omar's claws. "That brute of yours never likes me, Jill. I can't think why."

"Perhaps he also gets mad with people who don't do anything," suggested Jill, demurely. "It's funny, though," she added, "because most animals get on with you quite well, don't they?"

"Probably," said Hazel, "Omar considers Garry bad for you——"

"'Bad for her'?" interrupted Lester indignantly. "And why the dickens should I be 'bad for her,' I'd like to know?"

"Oh, I don't mean bad for her in the ordinary way," returned Hazel, hastily. "I mean inimical to her fate—without being able to help it, you know. I always think Omar is rather like a sphinx—has all sorts of inside knowledge. I believe, if he could only speak, he could tell all our horoscopes."

"Then I wish the devil he *could* speak. I'd like very much to know what is going to happen to me in the future," said Garry, looking across at Jill with a curious half-resentful, half-baffled expression in his eyes.

Hazel rose to her feet, preparatory to taking her departure.

"Would you?" she answered. "I think it's a very good thing we *don't* know the future. It might make one rather frightened of life. You know what the real Omar says, don't you? 'To-morrow's tangle to the winds resign.' It's very sound advice, really."

"Who gave it to you, Hazel?" asked Jill, quickly.

"Mr. Quayne quoted it one day when we were talking together. I think," she added musingly, "he must have gone through rather a bad time once. He's a bit of a cynic, you know."

"He sounds interesting," commented Jill. "Must you really go, old thing? Well, good-bye, then. Give my love to your little mother."

She accompanied Hazel to the door of the flat, and returned to find Garry staring moodily down into the fire while Omar, seated a prohibitive distance away, regarded him with brooding, hostile eyes.

"What's the matter, Garry?" she inquired lightly. "You don't look quite pleased with things in general."

"I'm not," he returned shortly. Then, speaking with

a sudden vehemence, he went on: "I wish you'd give up this idea of going down to Lorne."

Jill, who was about to light a cigarette, paused and looked up at him in astonishment.

"Why ever should I?" she asked.

"Because I don't want you to go there."

"But, Garry, that's absurd," she protested. "I shan't be away long."

"A lot may happen in a very little time," he answered gloomily. "Probably you'll meet someone down there —this Quayne fellow, for instance—and he'll persuade you into marrying him. Jill, don't go!" he added, a sudden note of passion in his voice.

"You're rather letting your imagination run riot, aren't you?" she said, smiling. "I've no intention of marrying anybody, and from all Hazel's ever said about Mr. Quayne, I gather he's a confirmed misogynist. So I really don't think you need worry yourself on that score, Garry."

He was silent for a moment. Then:

"You dismiss things very lightly. I 'need not worry myself'! It's not a question of 'worrying oneself' when a man loves a woman as I love you. It's—it's hell. Sometimes I think you do care a little. At others, I'm sure you don't. Which is it, Jill?" He drew a step nearer to her and caught her hands in his, forcing her to face him.

She looked up at him with troubled eyes.

"I—don't know, Garry. I'm fond of you—you know that. But"—shaking her head—"it isn't the kind of love you want. And, anyway, I'm never going to marry anyone—not even if I imagined myself in love."

"Pshaw!" He flung her hands away from him.

"That's rot—utter rot! No woman like you is going to go through life unmarried."

For a moment Jill was conscious of a sudden apprehension, a sense of fear. Would destiny one day prove too strong for her? Lady Susan's terse assertion echoed fatalistically in her ears: "One's never really safe from matrimony this side the grave."

"I've got my work," she said firmly, inwardly combating that sense of fear.

"Your work!" retorted Garry. "Do you think"—looking down at her with burning eyes—"that I'm going to let your work stand between us? I'm not afraid of that. What I *am* afraid of——" Abruptly he bit his words off, and Jill looked up questioningly.

"Well?" she said rather low.

"Don't go down to Lorne, Jill!" he burst out impetuously, a note of passionate appeal in his voice. "I've a presentiment that if you go you'll never come back—at least, not to me. Some other man will fall in love with you."

"That wouldn't matter at all from your point of view," replied Jill, trying to speak lightly. "The only thing that would matter to you would be if *I* happened to fall in love with somebody else. And that's the most unlikely thing in the world!"

He laid his hands on her shoulders and stood staring down at her with that familiar thwarted look in his eyes.

"I wish I were sure of that. Jill, will you at least promise me not to give your word to any other man while you are away? To come back as free as you leave here?"

She shook her head.

"No. I won't make any promises. You've no right to ask such a thing of me," she said rather indignantly.

A dangerous light glowed in his eyes.

"Right doesn't always count when a man loves," he answered slowly, as though putting a forced restraint upon himself. "You'll find that out one day, Jill."

She was conscious of an odd sensation of foreboding. More than once had she felt that same fear of Garry and his reckless passion steal over her. The comrade in him she loved, but she was afraid of the lover. And latterly it had sometimes seemed as though the lover was going to utterly crush out the good comradeship in which she had found so much of happiness. With an effort she fought back the wave of apprehension which had rushed over her.

"Well, in the meantime I'm going down to Lorne," she answered him with assumed gaiety. "And I intend to make a big success of that adorable Lady Susan."

CHAPTER IV

WHERE CLIFF MEETS SEA

WITH a grinding of brakes the train pulled up at what appeared little more than a wooden shed with an unkempt gravel path running in front of it, and Jill, unversed in the singular primitiveness of West Country wayside stations, stared doubtfully out of the window.

"St. Frances Halt! Anyone for Frances Halt?"

The sing-song Devonshire voice of the solitary porter, droning out the local abbreviation for Doon St. Frances Halt, galvanised her into action, and making a grab at the case, containing paints and brushes and all her artist's paraphernalia, which was reposing in the rack overhead, she threw open the door of the compartment. Being the sole passenger to descend she received the concentrated attention of the porter as soon as the train began to move away.

"Be you the young lady for Lorne, miss?" he asked, and, upon her nodding assent, he continued in a friendly, conversational manner: "Then for sure, the big suit-case out o' the van is yours." Again Jill nodded acquiescence, and he resumed: "Mr. Forrester, he be waiting for you out there"—jerking his head towards the roadway. "If you'll go, miss, I'll be along with the luggage right away."

Relinquishing into his hands the case she was carrying, Jill made her way out of the station to find a high

dog-cart, with between the shafts a big, upstanding bay with black points, stationary beside the footpath. At least, it was stationary for occasional moments. At others it was being more or less violently jerked about as the big, bay horse danced impatiently on his toes.

Just now, startled by the screech of the engine as the train drew out of the station, he was varying the programme by rearing up on his hind legs and coming down again indignantly with an evil twist of his tail.

Jill's eyes flew swiftly to the man who held the reins and who was looking as unconcerned as though the behaviour of the quadruped he drove were a matter of complete indifference. That he was tall could be surmised from the length of limb slackly outlined by the rug drawn up over his knees. He wore no hat, and in the slanting rays of the afternoon sun his dark red hair glinted vividly. There was something very virile about the whole man, with his strongly marked brows, beaky nose, and obstinate-looking chin. Above all, sheer dominant vitality gleamed in the intensely blue eyes with which he surveyed Jill as she approached.

"How d'you do?" he said. "You're Miss Wedderburn, aren't you? I'm Brett Forrester, Lady Susan's nephew. Do you think you can climb aboard during one of the intervals when this"—he checked a stronger word and substituted—"when this infernal idiot stands still for an instant?"

"I think it's just possible," replied Jill demurely, her own blue eyes twinkling.

She waited for a moment while the bay horse shifted restlessly to and fro. Then, when Forrester said: "Now!" and held out his hand to her, she put her foot on the step and, springing up, took her place beside him.

"Well done!" he exclaimed heartily, once again pulling the excitable horse to a standstill, so that the porter could put the luggage up.

A minute later they were off at a wild, raking pace which seemed to disconcert Brett Forrester not at all.

"I hope my suitcase won't fall off," observed Jill coolly. "Is the horse running away—or do you usually drive at this rate?"

Forrester looked down at her with a smile.

"Nervous?" he suggested.

For a moment she regarded the quiet, firm grasp of his hands on the reins. Then she shook her head.

"Not at all," she answered. "I'm sometimes nervous of drivers, never of horses."

"Thanks for the compliment," he said briefly, and then, apparently without effort, he steadied the horse down into a good, swinging trot.

Jill wondered with inward amusement whether he had merely been testing her nerve by letting the horse at first choose his own speed. There was a certain dare-devil impudence about the man which placed the supposition quite within the realm of possibilities. Then her thoughts wandered to the exquisite country-side through which they were passing. It was all new and wonderful to her —that peculiar tender beauty of Devon. Soft, curving hills rising and falling till they melted into the veiled purple-grey of distant moorland; fields, green with the young, fresh green of spring and fenced apart by big, wide hedges of red earth, clothed with leaf and fern; lush valleys where the mist lay like a filmy scarf, gleaming palely in the rays of the westering sun. Here and there a cluster of cottages huddled together, their thatched roofs velveted over with lichen and moss, while

drifts of smoke crept lazily upwards from the chimneys.

"How beautiful it all is!" said Jill softly. "It's—it's such a *lovable* kind of beauty. Not fine, or imposing, or magnificent—but just lovable."

Forrester looked down at her quickly.

"Yes," he said. "I think you've hit it exactly. That just describes Devon—it is a lovable sort of place."

They had left the village three miles behind, and now the dog-cart swung in between a pair of fine old gates and tooled up a drive, bordered by tall elms, between whose flickering, light-green leaves the sunlight filtered palely. Then a curve in the drive suddenly revealed the house, a long, two-storied building with creeper and climbing roses clothing its grey stone walls. The door stood open, and Lady Susan herself was waiting at the top of a shallow flight of steps to welcome the arrivals. As Brett helped her out of the dog-cart, Jill discerned the figure of a tall, eagle-eyed old man standing in the background.

"Here you are at last! Welcome to Lorne!" exclaimed Lady Susan's gay, jolly voice. She bent forward and kissed Jill warmly as the latter mounted the last step. "I'm so thankful Brett's brought you back safely. He insisted on meeting you himself, and refused the car in preference to driving one of those untamed devils he calls his horses. I hope you didn't mind?" she added anxiously.

"Not in the least," responded Jill, laughing. "He seemed quite able to cope with the one he was driving to-day."

"Oh, Satan's all right," interposed Brett placidly. "Your train was over an hour late and he was getting a bit restive with waiting about. That was all. He's quite

amenable when he's properly driven, and only plays tricks on the grooms because they're afraid of him."

"And I don't blame them, either!" returned Lady Susan, smiling. "Jill, let me introduce my husband."

The tall old man Jill had observed in the background greeted her with a queer mixture of old-fashioned courtesy and grim distrust.

"So you're the young lady who's going to paint my wife's portrait," he remarked, as they all made their way into the house. "You don't look grown-up enough to undertake a job like that."

Jill smiled up at him.

"You're scared stiff that I'm going to make a mess of it, aren't you?" she said with the utmost friendliness. "You needn't be, really, Sir Philip. It isn't my looks that matter—I might look fifteen or fifty and make just as big a mess of the portrait."

A slow, unwilling smile twitched the corners of the old man's lips.

"I suppose that's true," he admitted.

"Well, if I do, you can shoot the picture back—that's a fair offer, isn't it? But I promise you I won't."

And looking down into the direct blue eyes lifted to his, Sir Philip felt suddenly conscious of an unexpected confidence in her.

"I don't believe you will," he said heartily. "I think you've got the right stuff in you."

Tea was waiting for them in the hall—a typically Devonshire hall, floored and panelled with oak grown dark with age and gleaming with the lustrous sheen born of years of careful polishing. Above, a gallery ran round the hall, throwing its corners into deep shadow, while far overhead again arched rafters of sturdy oak,

dim and blackened with the smoke of centuries. The only glints of colour were supplied by the red glow of the log fire smouldering on the wide, old-fashioned hearth, and by great bowls of flowers—gorgeous peonies, glowing like coloured jewels against their background of sombre panelling, yellow irises, tall and greenly slender, and here and there the feather-like spires of clustered white and lavender-blue lilac.

Tea was a friendly, informal meal, and later on, when Lady Susan conducted Jill to her room, she whispered gleefully:

"We shan't have any trouble over the portrait, after all. You've made a conquest of my husband."

"Have I?" returned Jill, laughing. "Then I'm very glad. He'd be rather—rather alarming, I should think, if he took a dislike to anyone."

"Oh, his bark's far worse than his bite—like some of the Tribes," answered Lady Susan reassuringly. "He was extremely fond of my little Ann—Ann Lovell, who used to live with me at one time. I missed her dreadfully when she got married. And somehow you remind me of her," she went on rather wistfully. "You've got just her plucky little air of independence."

Jill's face saddened a trifle.

"I've *had* to be—independent," she said. "I've been on my own practically all my life."

"Well, you won't be able to say that in future," replied Lady Susan. "I'm going to keep my eye on you. Now tell me, do you like your room?"

Jill had crossed to the window and was looking out. Below her stretched shaven lawns, dotted here and there with oak and cedar, sloping down to a valley where a placid lake glowed rosily in the evening light which lay

across it. Beyond, on the farther side of the lake, rose wooded hills, the young green of oak and elm and beech trees contrasting sharply with the sombre darkness of clustered pine and fir, blackly outlined against the tender amethyst and gold of a sky which was already heralding the coming sunset. Here and there twinkled a homely light from the windows of some dusky cottage, and in the farthest distance, wrapped in dim, mysterious grey, brooded the silent moors.

"Do I like my room?" repeated Jill, turning to Lady Susan with radiant eyes. "I love it! Imagine seeing all that"—waving her hand expressively—"every time I look out of the window—instead of the dull bricks and mortar of somebody else's house! Why, it's simply heavenly!"

"I'm so glad," answered Lady Susan warmly. "That's just how I hoped—how I thought you'd feel. Now, we shall be dining in about an hour, so I'll send my maid along to unpack your things. Don't be late," she added with a humorous smile. "You know what men are like as regards punctuality in other people! And Sir Philip is just like every other man that way; he can't bear to be kept waiting—if he happens to be ready himself." And with a cheerful nod she quitted the room, leaving Jill to reflect that for the present, at least, her lines had fallen in very pleasant places.

As the days slipped by they only served to confirm this impression. A large room possessing a good north light had been converted into a temporary studio, and here she worked away at her portrait of Lady Susan, while Brett, who proposed staying at Lorne until the end of the week, and Sir Philip himself, drifted interestedly in and out. The latter vouchsafed little beyond an occasional grunt of approval, but Brett would some-

times remain for an hour or more, skilfully extracting from an unsuspicious Jill an account of the various ups and downs of her life, of her friendship with Hazel, and a full description of the Chelsea studio and the Bohemian parties which frequently took place there.

"I shall come to your parties—you will invite me, won't you?" he implored her one day. "Because this adamantine woman"—indicating his aunt—"is continually trying to circumvent my efforts to see more of that delightful secretary of hers."

"Hazel, do you mean?" queried Jill.

"Yes," assented Lady Susan. "You see, he falls in love with such facility—and then is so tiresome when refused."

"Miss Kenyon might not refuse a fellow," protested Brett.

"She's been known to do such a thing," retorted Jill mischievously.

"You know her very well, don't you?" he pursued, on a deeply reflective note.

"She happens to be my best pal," admitted Jill.

He grinned delightedly across at Lady Susan.

"In that case, I'm completely independent of you, my stony-hearted aunt. I shall forthwith proceed to make violent love to Miss Wedderburn and then she'll invite me to her adorable parties, where you all sit on the floor. And I shall sit on the floor next Miss Kenyon."

"When you are really in love, Brett, you'll find me on your side," rejoined Lady Susan quietly. "But you've not known real love yet—because there's no selfishness in love."

She looked at him rather significantly as she spoke, and Jill saw his face grow suddenly grave, while a curious

absent, questioning expression took birth in his eyes. She felt sure that Lady Susan's remark had reference to something which had happened in his past of which his aunt had cognisance, and she wondered casually what it could be. Then, determinedly dismissing the thought, she applied herself afresh to the painting of Lady Susan's portrait.

A few days later Brett took his departure from Lorne for White Windows, a house near Silverquay, which, formerly Lady Susan's own home, she had bestowed upon him when she married Sir Philip. Jill, who had come to regard Brett as a thoroughly good pal during the course of their mutual sojourn at Lorne, offered to accompany him to the station.

"That is, if you'll walk, and send your luggage on ahead," she stipulated.

"But, my dear child, it'll mean a six or seven mile walk for you, there and back," he objected.

"That's just what I feel like," she asserted. "We can go by way of the downs, and it's perfectly glorious there in an afternoon. And I shall get back in good time to dress for dinner."

"You'll find it very soppy after the last two days' rain," suggested Lady Susan.

"Well, I can change my shoes the minute I get back," returned Jill.

"Of course she can." Brett hastened to endorse the proposal. "Besides," he added, a gleam of mockery in his eyes, "Jill hasn't so much sugar in her composition that she need be afraid of melting."

So the matter was arranged, and in the afternoon the two set out together, making their way over the green downs which crowned the cliffs.

"It's pretty mushy underfoot," remarked Brett, as they tramped along together. "Are you sure you'd rather not turn back?"

"Quite sure," answered Jill promptly.

"Well, let's keep inland a bit, then," he advised. "The edge of these cliffs is a bit treacherous—especially after heavy rain. They're red sandstone, you know, and crumble easily."

Obediently Jill veered inland, and they continued their way at a swinging pace for nearly three miles before turning off to the right in the direction of St. Frances Halt, the little station which had amused her so much when she had first made its acquaintance.

The train was already signalled by the time they reached it, and, side by side, they paced up and down the weed-grown path which ran parallel with the rails. Suddenly Brett bent towards her.

"Honest Injun, Jill, may I come to your flat sometimes —to those studio rags, you know?"

There was an unaccustomed undercurrent of earnestness in his usually light tones. Jill paused in her walk.

"I'm rather afraid of you, Brett," she said quietly. "I —don't want Hazel hurt."

He was silent for a moment.

"I know what you mean," he replied at last. "I suppose Aunt Susan has told you all my sins. But this time, if there's anyone who'll be hurt, it'll be me."

He spoke with a quiet conviction, and Jill glanced searchingly up at him. All the usual mockery that lay in his gay blue eyes had gone out of them, and he returned her look for look.

"It's the real thing this time," he added quietly. "For

me, at least. As for whether I've any chance with Hazel——" He shrugged his shoulders.

As he spoke the train ran into the station. Jill held out her hand.

"Then if it's like that, Brett, you may come."

Five minutes later the train was bearing him swiftly away and Jill was retracing her steps towards the downs. It was getting late in the afternoon, and the slanting rays of the sun were flinging a tremulous golden path across the water. The tide was coming in, but it had not quite reached the foot of the cliffs. An ever-narrowing band of glistening sand intervened between their rocky base and the waves as they broke on the shore. The far horizon was smudged with the smoke of some big steamer; here and there the sails of homing fishing-boats gleamed picturesquely red or white; a small rowing-boat was just crossing the shimmering golden path the sunlight had flung across the waters.

Jill had drawn rather closer to the verge of the cliff in order to watch the fishing-boats heading for the bay, and now, idly trying to make out whether it was a man or woman in the little rowing-boat almost immediately opposite where she stood, she shaded her eyes with her hand from the glare of the sun and unconsciously took a step or two still nearer to the cliff's sodden edge.

The next moment she felt the turf, which clothed the headland to the very brink, give way suddenly beneath her feet, throwing her forward. She made a frantic effort to regain her balance, rocked wildly a second, then pitched forward and felt herself falling helplessly down —down towards that distant blur of sea and sand nearly a hundred feet below. . . .

CHAPTER V

"AULD ACQUAINTANCE"

WHEN Jill came to her senses again it was to the dull boom of waves thundering against the cliffs far below. For a few moments she was conscious of nothing else—nothing save that rhythmic crash as the breakers flung themselves against the face of the rock and the soughing whine with which they fell away again, only to gather themselves together for a fresh onslaught.

She opened her eyes slowly. At first it seemed very dark, as though a thick fog encompassed her, making blurred shadows of her surroundings. But gradually this cleared, and she was able to see that she was lying on a shelf of rock which jutted out from the side of the cliff. Above her she could discern vaguely the backward slant of the headland, with here and there tufts of long grass growing, or a stunted shrub, green against the red. How did she come to be lying here—here with the cliff sloping back above her? The last thing she remembered was standing on its summit, watching the red and white sails of the fishing-boats as they tacked homeward. She had been—where had she been?—to the station with Brett. Yes, that was it, to the station. Then how did she come to be here? . . . All at once recollection returned, accompanied by a rush of sheer helpless terror—recollection of the ground suddenly giving way beneath her feet, of clutching wildly at nothing, at space, and then the

horrible sensation of falling headlong. A frightened cry broke from her lips, and instantly she heard a voice—a man's voice—saying:

"You're quite safe. Don't worry."

There was something vaguely, distantly familiar about the voice. In a curious way it seemed to be associated in her mind with some impression of danger, and instead of giving her confidence it only served to frighten her still more.

"Oh, where am I?" she gasped, reaching out terrified hands as though to ward off something that menaced her.

The next moment she felt them taken and held by others—cool, steady, reassuring hands, these—and the same voice as before said quietly:

"You're on a good wide ledge of rock. Don't be afraid. You can't possibly fall off, because I'm on the outer side—between you and the edge."

This time the voice did not frighten her, and, almost like a child, she looked in the direction from which it came as though to satisfy herself that the statement it made was true. It was. Against the pale glimmer of the sea a man's figure showed clearly limned. He was seated beside her on the ledge, his back to the cliff, his feet braced against a jagged rim of upstanding rock, and her eyes found themselves looking straight into a pair of deep-set grey ones. Again the sense of familiarity pricked her, and she frowned a little, puzzled whence it came.

The man noted the frown instantly and mentally attributed it to a spasm of pain.

"Have you hurt yourself?" he asked quickly. "See, take a pull at this brandy flask, and then try to move your limbs a little."

Obediently Jill gulped down some of the raw spirit, making a wry face of disgust as she swallowed it. It revived her, nevertheless, and rather cautiously she began to test her limbs, the man beside her watching her intently meanwhile. And it was at that precise moment, as, stimulated by the brandy, her senses cleared, that she recognised in him the man with whom she had had supper at the Chat Noir on that foggy November night two and a half years ago. It was unmistakable—there was the same lean face with its rather weary grey eyes, the same square jaw, and the strange mouth in which the original sweetness natural to it seemed to have been obliterated by a bitter, unyielding cynicism which had superimposed itself.

She understood now whence had come that queer mental association with danger which had flashed through her at the first sound of his voice. The memory of the moment when it had seemed as though nothing could save her from the wheels of the motor-car beneath which she had almost fallen came vividly back to her.

"Nothing appears to be broken," she said at last, when she had simultaneously tested her anatomy and digested the fact of her companion's identity. "I really can't understand why not," she went on in a voice of surprise. "But I certainly do feel a bit bruised."

He laughed briefly.

"I've no doubt you do. It's a miracle you weren't killed. Are you subject to giddiness—or do you think you could stand up? The ledge of rock we're on is quite a broad one," he added reassuringly. "Close on six feet wide."

"No, I don't turn giddy as a rule," answered Jill. "But I feel a little shaky just at this minute."

"I'll help you up," he said, getting to his feet as he spoke. "Give me your hands—so"—suiting the action to the words. "You'll be quite safe. I won't let go of you. Only I want to see if you can stand all right."

Clinging to his hands, and rather quakily, Jill scrambled up. It was obvious that, bruised and sore though she might feel, she had received no actual injury as a consequence of her fall.

"Good!" exclaimed the man in tones of satisfaction. "You're rather a lucky young woman on the whole," he said tranquilly. "Constantly tempting providence and yet always getting away with it."

Jill's eyes flashed up to his face.

"You remember, too, then?" she said swiftly.

He smiled.

"I didn't just at the beginning," he acknowledged. "Not at the first moment when I found you lying here. You've—altered, I think." He regarded her critically. Though still charmingly angled, the hollows in her face had filled out a little, its former pallor had been exchanged for a soft glow of colour in the cheeks, and the look of strain, so noticeable at his first meeting with her, had completely vanished. She looked happy instead of harassed.

Jill nodded sagely.

"Yes, I've grown—richer. That makes a lot of difference, you know."

"I'm glad," he answered simply. "Riches don't always make for happiness, though. But I see they have done so in your case."

"Yes," came the frank response. "They have. But now, do tell me, how did you find me here?"

"Sit down again, then," he said. "With your back

against the cliff. Then you'll be comparatively comfy. It's quite a long story, you know."

"Is it?" replied Jill, as she curled herself up obediently. "Then you must begin at once, because it's fairly late and I must be starting for home. And, since you succeeded in getting here, I suppose it's not impossible to get away?" she added easily, smiling up at him.

He had remained standing, leaning negligently against the cliff behind him. Obviously, high places held no terror for him.

"I was out in a boat," he said, ignoring her question, "when I saw you standing on the top of Coryton Point."

" 'M. I was watching the fishing-boats going home," supplemented Jill.

"It struck me that you were already rather dangerously near the edge, and then suddenly, without any apparent reason, you stepped forward. And the next moment you toppled over. . . . Of course, I thought it was all up with you, but, to my surprise, after that first drop of a few feet, you rolled—literally rolled—comfortably down a slope till you fetched up against the ridge of rock which edges this shelf we're on. And there you stayed. I pulled to shore as fast as I could, beached the boat, and then climbed up the cliff and found you here."

"Was it—very difficult?" she asked, reflecting with some trepidation that climbing down again was probably the only way out of their present predicament.

"No. These sandstone cliffs aren't very difficult to manœuvre, you know—they're often fairly soft in places, with shrubs and grass growing on them and bits of rock sticking out to give you something to hang on to."

"Still, it was very clever of you," she said.

"Very," he agreed gravely.

"But, after all, it was your fault that I fell," she added.

"Mine?" He regarded her attentively. "How do you make that out?"

"Why"—with a little smile—"I stepped forward to try and see whether it was a man or a woman in your boat. It looked so pretty, crossing the track of sunlight. . . . And then the edge of the cliff suddenly seemed to give way."

"Well, thank God, you weren't seriously hurt!" he said, a slight roughness in his voice. "Though you'll probably feel a bit stiff and sore to-morrow," he continued more lightly.

"I shall also be horribly late for dinner to-night," returned Jill, "which is a much more serious matter. Old Sir Philip will be simply fuming."

"Sir Philip? Are you staying at Lorne, then?"

She nodded.

"Yes. And he gets in such a stew if anyone is late for meals."

"I'm afraid he'll get in a bigger stew than usual, then, on this occasion," he observed dryly. "Because you won't get back to Lorne till to-morrow morning."

"To-morrow morning!" She looked at him aghast. "What do you mean? Why not?"

"You'll at least be punctual for breakfast," he pursued calmly.

"But I'm not going to stay here all night! If you could climb up here, we can surely both climb down again—I'm rather good at climbing, as a matter of fact."

"I should think you might be 'rather good' at quite a number of things," he said, with a brief flicker in his

eyes. "But even if we did climb down, it would be no earthly good. The tide is well over the base of the cliffs already, and will still be rising for the next hour."

"Then I suppose we shall have to wait until it goes down," allowed Jill resignedly.

"Until to-morrow morning," he repeated. Then, in response to her look of inquiry, he went on explanatorily: "Don't you see, by the time the tide goes out far enough for us to walk home along the shore, it will be too dark to attempt the climb down. So we may as well reserve our dexterity."

"Couldn't we climb *up?*" suggested Jill hopefully. He shook his head.

"Only as far as the top of the slope down which you rolled. After that, the summit of the cliff overhangs too much. We couldn't—*you* certainly couldn't—manage it without ropes from above."

Jill was silent for a moment out of sheer dismay. What people might think or say of her spending the night alone on the cliff side with an unknown man was the last thing that worried her—just as with a different and more conventional type of woman it would probably have been the first. She had long ago evolved the philosophy that if you are guilty of any kind of unconventionality —however innocent—people say things, and that if you don't do anything of the sort, some people still say things, out of the innate unpleasantness of their minds, so that you may just as well please yourself and go your way—provided that before the bar of your own conscience that way is a clean and decent one.

What troubled her was the alarm which this unfortunate happening would be certain to cause Lady Susan and Sir Philip. They would be almost distracted with

anxiety as hour after hour went by and still there was no sign of her nor any means of discovering what had become of her.

"Oh, I do wish I could phone them!" she exclaimed impulsively.

The man beside her went off into an involuntary shout of laughter, in which, after an instant's hesitation, Jill herself joined.

"That was rather idiotic of me, wasn't it?" she said, laughter still curving her lips. "But I'm feeling all hot and bothered. The Brabazons will be fearfully worried when I don't turn up."

"That's unavoidable, I'm afraid. What worries *me*" —with a brief smile—"is that we've got a long, dark, and in all probability, chilly night in front of us, without overcoats or the prospect of even a decent dinner to keep our spirits up."

"And—and there's really *nothing* we can do?" said Jill desperately. Her lips quivered a little. She was still feeling sore and shaken from her fall. The realisation of the long, uncomfortable hours stretching ahead came upon her with a sudden overwhelmingness. And all at once she was conscious of fear—fear of this steep cliff on which they were trapped and fear of the sea which thundered hungrily below.

As though he understood, her companion took her hands and held them firmly in his once more.

"No," he said gently. "There's nothing we can do but just wait till morning. Don't be frightened, though—there's no need. We shan't be comfortable, but we're as safe as though we stood between four walls."

"Are you sure—*sure?*" queried Jill nervously.

"Quite sure. And as to the proprieties"—again that

whimsical smile, softening the acquired hardness in his face—"perhaps it will minimise that side of it if we remember that we are really old friends of over two years' standing. It's quite that length of time since we met in a fog one evening. And still further to assure you of my eminent respectability, I'm a friend of the Brabazons—of Lady Susan's especially."

Jill smiled, some of her poise coming back to her. He had talked leisurely on with that precise object in view.

"I don't think the impropriety of the matter had occurred to me," she said candidly. "It was just—I don't know—that suddenly one felt so alone and insecure, perched up here. Rather like a fly on a wall."

"I know," he answered sympathetically. "But you're *not* alone—and a fly on a wall is one of the most secure things imaginable. By the way, in spite of our 'auld acquaintance,' we don't even know each other's names. Shall we swop?"

She nodded. Ever since that foggy November night, two and a half years ago, at odd and unexpected intervals, she had been conscious of an underlying curiosity as to the name of the unknown man with whom she had supped at the Chat Noir—the man who had told her that it was too late for anyone to wish him luck. It had somehow lingered in her memory—the queerly bitter note in his voice, the quiet irony in his eyes as he had spoken. *"Sometimes thirty-two sees you through all the luck you're going to get,"* he had added. And the remembrance of that, too, had always brought a quick stab of compassion for this man whom in some way life must have hurt—and hurt hard.

"Yes," said Jill. "Do let us swop names." Then, to

cover a queer, absurd little thrill of anticipation which all at once beset her, she added lightly: "You first."

"You'll play fair afterwards?" he demanded. "Not spirit yourself away without telling me—as you did that night after the fog cleared?"

She shook her head.

"There's not much chance of my doing that here, is there?" she observed, glancing round expressively.

He laughed.

"No, I suppose there isn't. I needn't have been afraid of it on this occasion."

"Well?" she queried, looking up at him.

"My name's Quayne," he said. "Straton Quayne."

CHAPTER VI

AT SUNSET

STRATON QUAYNE! So it was Hazel's "author-man" who had twice come to her rescue! A fugitive thought flashed through Jill's mind as to the odd way in which fate links you up with others—fashioning a link here and a link there, and then quite suddenly you find yourself one of a little group of people who have all been gradually connected up and drawn into the same circle.

"In that case," she said, "you must know another friend of mine—Hazel Kenyon. She's doing secretarial work for you, isn't she?"

Quayne nodded.

"Then I believe I can guess your name," he replied. "Are you, by any chance, Miss Wedderburn?"

"Yes. Still, I don't quite see how you guessed it"—interrogatively.

"Why, Miss Kenyon has told me a good deal about her friendship with Miss Wedderburn, the well-known artist—and I remembered that when we had supper together at the Chat Noir, you told me you were going to paint—even"—with a twinkle in his eyes—"to the complete exclusion of matrimony from your programme."

A faint flush stole into Jill's cheeks. His recollection of that November night seemed almost as accurate as her own. Somehow it gave her an odd little thrill of pleasure to know that he, too, had remembered.

The daylight was fading now. Already the sun had dipped below the distant rim of the sea, and the dusk was deepening rapidly. From below still came the boom of the waves, and now and again a little chill whiff of air drifted by, cool with the breath of coming night.

"Luckily," remarked Quayne, "I didn't eat all the sandwiches I took with me when I left home this morning, so we shan't quite starve. And there's still some brandy left in my flask." He dived into his pockets and deposited the flask together with the packet containing the remaining sandwiches, on the ground, and proceeded to pull off his coat.

"It will be several sizes too large for you," he observed, quizzically regarding Jill's slight proportions. But it's none the worse for that from the point of view of keeping you warm. I almost think"—smiling—"it would go twice round you."

"I'm not going to have your coat," she objected quickly.

"Oh, yes, you are."

"No, no, really," she insisted. "You'd be frozen without it."

He laughed a little.

"Not I. Men's clothing is so much more commonsense than women's. All you've got on underneath the frock you're wearing is an assortment of thin silk-and-lace stuff, I expect. Now, isn't it?"—challengingly.

"I'm afraid it is," admitted Jill.

"I thought so. Whereas I'm wearing flannels and a woolly sweater on the top of that. So no more nonsense about this coat. Come, put it on."

He spoke imperiously, and Jill, somewhat surprised at her own meekness, permitted him to help her into it.

"And what comes next on the programme?" she asked, a faint note of raillery in her voice.

"We sit down, trying to imagine that this excessively unyielding rock is a well-cushioned Chesterfield—you know you've only got to think hard enough, on the auto-suggestion principle! Then we consume the remainder of the sandwiches and brandy, enlivening the repast with pleasant conversation, and after that"—smiling—"I don't think we've much choice of amusement. An early night seems indicated."

Jill laughed and agreed.

"By the way," she asked, as they settled themselves and shared out the sandwiches, "what will have happened to your boat? I never thought of that before."

"Quite a waste of time, if you had. It will have come to an untimely end between the sea and cliff long ago."

"I feel horribly guilty."

"You needn't. The loss of an old tub like that is a very small price to put against so charming an adventure as this."

There was a tinge of mockery in his voice, and Jill winced under it. Now she knew that he was Straton Quayne, the man who wrote so stingingly—sometimes almost cruelly—about women, and who bore the reputation of being a confirmed misogynist, she felt that a certain significance might lie behind the mocking intonation.

"You have a way of making a pretty speech so that it's practically the same thing as a snub," she said. Adding, rather distantly: "I'm awfully sorry to be such a nuisance—giving you so much trouble."

He looked down at her.

"Did you really think that?" he said quickly. "You were never more mistaken in your life. I meant pre-

cisely what I said. It is a charming adventure—such a one as doesn't often fall to my lot. The last one"—smiling—"occurred about two and a half years ago."

Jill laughed a trifle uncertainly and nibbled at her last sandwich.

"That was rather a lucky adventure for me," she said hurriedly, "because I'd had nothing to eat except coffee and rolls for two days. I've always felt so ashamed of the way I wolfed down my supper that night, and—and wanted to explain."

"There was no need," he returned. "I knew—I guessed, at least. You were rather down on your luck, just then, weren't you?"

"Very," she assented, smiling at the remembrance. "And my next two days' meals went on that wretched taxi!"

Quayne gazed straight ahead of him, an oddly conflicting expression in his eyes.

"It was damnable," he said at last. "I wanted to help you, but I didn't dare even to suggest a small loan. You—you looked too confoundedly independent. Tell me"—curiously—"would you have accepted it if I had?"

She shook her head.

"Of course not."

"But why not? Are you too proud to be 'beholden to a mere man—even in such dire circumstances?"

"Yes, I am."

"I think you're wrong."

"Of course you do. Being a man, you like the dependent type of woman."

"Do men?"

"Don't they? It makes them feel such great, big, splendid creatures—lords of the earth."

"Do you know," said Quayne, smiling suddenly, "if this ledge were a little wider and there weren't quite such an unpleasant big drop on one side of us, I should very much like to shake you."

"From your books—I've read them, you see!—I imagine you'd rather like to shake the whole sex, wouldn't you?"

It was getting almost too dark to see any change of expression in his face, but there was a curious alteration in his voice when he spoke again. It sounded harsh, almost violent.

"Shaking's a damn sight too good for some women."

Of whom was he thinking, Jill wondered? That the memory of some individual woman had prompted that savage thrust, she felt convinced. The next moment he turned to her in the kindliest manner possible.

"Now I'm going to tuck you up for the night," he said. "See, here's a hollow—comparatively soft earth—with a little bulge above it. With the help of a certain amount of imagination it might be construed into being a pillow. If you'll try it, I think you may find it just endurable."

Jill obeyed mechanically. Inwardly, she was puzzling over the abrupt changes in his manner—from mockery to a definite gravity, from a gust of suppressed fury to the utmost gentleness. Meanwhile he drew his coat more closely about her, making her as comfortable as circumstances permitted, and when this was accomplished he settled himself beside her and for a few minutes they talked desultorily, smoking the last two cigarettes which remained in Quayne's case.

With the turn of the tide a deep tranquillity seemed to have descended on the world, and gradually the con-

versation grew more and more intermittent, with long gaps between filled only by the rhythmic murmur of the receding sea. Through the dusk Jill could just discern the outline of Quayne's tall figure, the tip of his cigarette, like a tiny red star hanging in space, alternately glowing and paling. She had flung away the stub of her own and reflected that he had made his last much longer than she had hers. Rather vaguely she wondered why a woman usually smoked so much faster than a man. That was her last coherent thought, and then, tired out with the happenings of the day, she fell asleep.

CHAPTER VII

"OVER THE TOP"

JILL woke with a start. It was quite dark, so dark that she could not distinguish anything. For a moment she puzzled stupidly over the impenetrable blackness which surrounded her, then recognised that of course she must have awakened in the middle of the night. . . . The bed—what had happened to her bed? It was so hard—hideously hard and uncomfortable. Her limbs ached with it. Half unconsciously she stretched out her hand, only to bring it sharply into contact with the wall. . . . No, it wasn't a wall—this damp, stone-cold substance rough against her knuckles! And then came realisation, swift and overwhelming. She was somewhere betwixt earth and sky on the steep side of Coryton Point, and below her the great cliff fell away seventy feet or more.

Panic—sheer, paralysing panic—seized her. That huge drop—and, for all she knew, she might have shifted her position in her sleep, turned restlessly this way or that, and be lying within a few inches of the stark edge of the cliff. Only she could not be sure! The darkness, that terrible muffling darkness, hid everything. She could scarcely breathe in it, and her heart was thudding painfully in her side. There was pain, too, in her cramped limbs—pain that stabbed like a knife. She *must* move—

must! And to move, to change the position in which she lay, might mean instant death.

For a few interminable moments she lay there shuddering, too terrified to stir, swept by hot waves of fear such as had never before encompassed her. At last, driven by the excruciating pain in her limbs, she again stretched out her arm, groping with searching fingers for something tangible in the midst of the smothering darkness. But her hands closed on nothing—on emptiness, and her heart gave a terrified leap. She must be lying close to the edge of the cliff, then, and in a minute—two, possibly three minutes—the agony of her tortured body would drive her into movement, whether she would or no, and she would fall over—down, down into those horrible depths below. A strangled cry broke from her. And almost before its utterance ceased she felt a strong, lean hand close over hers, and Quayne's voice said:

"Why, I thought you were asleep, child."

"Asleep!" The little gasped-out word sounded more like a sob than anything else. But, somehow, with the touch of that reassuring hand on hers, the overmastering terror which had beset her lessened a little. "I daren't move," she went on in a frightened whisper. "I'm lying right on the edge——"

The next thing she felt was an arm thrown across her body. Then out of the darkness came Quayne's voice again, cheery and confident.

"You're nothing of the sort. You're nowhere near the edge."

Jill gripped the arm and held on to it like a drowning man to a rope.

"Come closer to me," went on Quayne quietly. "You'll feel safer then."

"Oh, I couldn't—I couldn't move," she declared hysterically, her teeth beginning to chatter. The bare idea of attempting to change her position in this utter darkness filled her with fresh terror.

"Steady on, now," he said soothingly. He struck a match and by its light observed exactly how she was lying. "You're quite all right," he said, as he blew out the match. "Now, I'm going to help you into a different place."

Kneeling beside her on one knee, with his shoulder pressed firmly against the cliff behind him, he slid one arm underneath her and, gripping her firmly with the other, he half dragged, half lifted her so that her slight, shaking body rested against his own. Then, still holding her, he managed to resume his former position, and, sitting down, drew her gently into the curve of his arm.

To Jill it seemed as though heaven had followed swiftly upon hell. She felt all at once perfectly safe and secure. She *could* not fall now—not with that arm encircling her like a bar of steel. And with the freedom to move her limbs came cessation of that agonising pain.

She clung with both hands to the arm around her, and then, quite suddenly, the relief from the tension she had been enduring found vent in a burst of tears. She fumbled fruitlessly for her handkerchief, and promptly found a large, cool, masculine one put into her hand.

"Jill—why, Jill!" Quayne's voice had a queer rough note in it. "I'd no idea you were lying there working yourself up into this state of paine. I thought you were asleep. If I'd known——" He broke off abruptly and she felt his arm tighten a little in its hold of her.

But that swift flood of tears had done its work, and

after a few minutes she contrived to pull herself together.

"Mr. Quayne, I'm terribly sorry for being such a fool," she said at last, in a small, rather ashamed voice.

"I think," he replied deliberately, "polite formalities are rather out of place here. Please say 'Straton,' won't you?"

"May I? I'd ever so much rather. After all"—with a somewhat shaky attempt at a laugh—"it would sound rather absurd, wouldn't it, if I'd found myself going over the edge of the cliff, to have to shriek for 'Mr. Quayne'!"

"Very absurd," he agreed. "A night like this is calculated to make one take the preliminaries of friendship in one stride, don't you think?" He felt her make a tiny movement of assent. "And we can't go back, now, Jill," he went on, his tones deepening a little. "It looks rather as if fate itself had taken a hand in the game. . . . I wonder?" he added in a musing undertone, as though to himself.

Jill lay very still against his shoulder. She had an odd, intuitive feeling that he was inwardly fighting against something, although she could not imagine what it might be.

Presently he bent over her. She could feel his breath on her face.

"You can't possibly come to harm while I'm holding you like this. Do you feel safe enough to try to sleep a little now?"

As she stirred, she felt the ribbed thickness of the sweater he was wearing slightly rough against her cheek. It smelt faintly of tobacco.

"You do feel safe with me, don't you?" he asked, as she made no response. There seemed a curious urgency

about the question. It sounded as though, for the man who asked it, it held some deeper meaning than its purely obvious significance of the moment—as though something important, something that mattered, depended upon her answer to it.

"Yes," she replied simply. "I feel quite, quite safe."

"Good." He spoke briefly. "Then go to sleep."

And lulled by the distant murmur of the sea and by her feeling of utter and complete security, she gradually sank into slumber. Once, just before she quite lost consciousness, she murmured drowsily: "Good night, Straton," and was vaguely aware of a sudden pressure of the arms which held her, but she was too nearly asleep to know whether he made any actual reply or not.

When next Jill awoke it was daylight. The sun was climbing up the eastern sky and the air held that peculiar sweetness and freshness of the early morning—as though it had blown straight from the dawn. She stirred a little, and instantly the feeling of Straton's arm thrown around her brought back the remembrance of all that had happened. She looked up to find that he was unaware that she had awakened. One knee was crooked up, supporting his elbow, and he was staring out across the sea, his chin on his hand. His face looked very haggard in the clear morning light, and his deep-set eyes were shadow-circled, like eyes that have watched unsleeping for many hours. Jill felt a twinge of self-reproach.

"Good morning," she said softly.

He turned to her instantly.

"Awake?" he returned. "You've had a 'brave sleep,' as they say in this part of the world."

"And you?"

"I? Oh, I haven't slept much," he said, dismissing the matter lightly enough. "I couldn't have you falling over the precipice, and you seemed so determined upon doing so"—smiling—"that I thought I'd better keep an eye on you."

"Then you haven't slept at all?" she exclaimed in dismay.

"Which needn't trouble you in the least. I'm none the worse for that. But I'm devilish hungry. Aren't you?"

"Frightfully!" assented Jill with fervour. "And I suppose we've got to get down that awful cliff before we see our breakfast." She peered forward. "I shall never do it, Straton," she added resignedly, as she drew back.

"You won't need to." He got up, stretching his long limbs and stamping his feet to get the stiffness out of them. Then he helped her to rise. "You won't need to," he repeated.

"But how—why not?"

"Because, while you were still sleeping the sleep of the just"—looking down at her with a smile—"two or three early astir fishing boats came by and I managed to attract their attention by frantic waving of my handkerchief. One of the boats put back straight away and very shortly, presumably, some men will be coming along from the village with ropes to haul us up from the top."

Jill gave a little gasp.

"Oh, Straton, I think—I think I'd rather climb down than be hauled up like that."

He shook his head.

"I don't think you could manage it," he said judicially. "It isn't quite as easy as I made out to you last night—at least, not for a woman."

She glanced up at him swiftly. Then he had only been trying to reassure her last night when he had made so little of the difficulties of reaching her! Instead, he had risked—how much? Some time afterwards, when she stood on the sands below Coryton Point and looked up at the ledge where they had passed the night, she knew that he must have taken his life in his hands when he essayed that perilous climb.

"But I shall hate to be hauled up by ropes," she said. "It will be awful to dangle out over sheer space like that! And suppose the rope broke?"

"The rope won't break," returned Quayne. "Do you suppose they'd risk a rope that wasn't sound? And you won't 'dangle,' either. I shall be able to steady you at the beginning, and after that you'll just go smoothly up and the men waiting will lift you over the top."

" 'Over the top,' " repeated Jill, with a slightly unsteady laugh. "Yes, I think that's just what I shall feel like—like you men used to feel during the war when it was your turn to go 'over the top.' "

"Then do it with the same pluck," he counselled coolly.

She responded to the light flick of the lash which he had administered as a thoroughbred always does. When, finally, voices and shouts from above announced the arrival of the men with the necessary paraphernalia for effecting a rescue, she had braced herself for the ordeal. She stood very still while Straton arranged the rope around her, securing it firmly, and, when this was accomplished and he was giving her a few final instructions, she faced him with a pair of steady blue eyes.

"Thank you," she said. But she could not quite control her voice. It shook a trifle.

Quayne looked down at her. Her face was dead white.

Even her lips were bloodless, but they closed in a straight, courageous little line of determination. That frozen courage of hers, when he knew perfectly well that in her heart of hearts she was absolutely terrified of the ordeal which lay before her, touched him curiously.

"Game little devil!" he muttered beneath his breath.

For a moment it seemed as though they were wrapped around with a great solitude. The men above were silent, listening for the word of command to begin hauling up the rope. Even the face of the one, who, prone on the ground, had been working over the cliff's edge to gauge the necessities of the situation, had been temporarily withdrawn. There was only the sea and the cliff and the deepening dawnlight in the skies, and a man and woman standing alone together on a perilous ledge of rock.

In that momentary solitude the eyes of the two met —the deep-set grey ones, with a strange fire suddenly alight in them, and the blue ones, unconsciously appealing even through the outward stony courage which they held.

"Jill!" There was a dry harshness in Quayne's voice. Somewhere within his consciousness Jill's own words were hammering persistently, horribly: *"Suppose the rope should break?"* With a swift, impetuous movement he bent forward, and his arms closed round her like a vice. For an instant his lips crushed down on hers, then, almost before she realised what had happened, he had released her. . . .

"Ready below there?" The voice came from above, and, looking up, Jill could discern a man peering down, his face just visible over the edge of the cliff.

"Yes. Ready," Quayne called back. Then, turning to

Jill, he added comfortingly: "Don't be the least bit frightened. Just keep yourself clear of the cliff, as I told you how to do, where it overhangs a little, up there" —he pointed to the spot—"and the men above will do the rest."

She felt his hands about her, steadying her as the hauled rope slowly lifted her from the ground. Then came the agonising moment when she rose out of his reach and, without any reassuring touch of human hand, knew that she was swinging betwixt earth and sky. She kept her eyes fixed steadily in front of her. She dared not look down into that awful depth below where the rocks lay scattered on the shore at the foot of the cliff, nor up to where the rope was being cautiously eased over the edge of its summit.

It seemed an eternity of time—endless, illimitable—before she at last drew level with the brow of the cliff. Then voices, eager hands outstretched, and a moment later, disembarrassed of the rope which had borne her out of danger, she was standing on the short, tufted grass, free and untrammelled—and *safe*.

After that it did not take very long for the men to lower the rope once more for Quayne, and soon he, too, was landed safely on the top of the cliff. He shook the rough, kindly hands the men stretched out to him, thanked them, and told them to come up to Quayling that evening to receive a more substantial recognition of what they had done. Then he turned to Jill.

"We'll go to my place for some breakfast," he said cheerfully. "It's not half a mile away and the walk will take the stiffness out of our legs. Aren't you hungry? I am. We always seem to meet each other on 'hungry'

occasions, don't we?" he added, with a laugh. "We were both famished that night in the fog."

She laughed back and assented.

"Game for the walk to Quayling?" he queried.

"It's Hobson's choice, isn't it?" she returned gaily. "We can't very well stay here. But, as a matter of fact, I feel game for anything. It's—it's so topping to feel safe again."

"Yes," he responded, an odd intensity in his tones which brought Jill's glance fugitively and a trifle shyly up to his face. The remembrance of that sudden, passionate embrace in which he had held her just before she was hauled up to the top of the cliff came back to her vividly, and somehow she knew that he, also, was thinking of it. A faint flush dyed her cheeks, and she remained nervously silent, aware of an inexplicable sense of tumult.

He, too, spoke very little after that. But she was vibrantly conscious of his proximity, and in some subconscious way she knew that he was equally conscious of hers. He strode along beside her, looking straight ahead, his face set in grim lines, and when he did speak it was with a curt brevity that seemed as though he were deliberately trying to combat that consciousness, to beat down a certain emotional significance which had all at once crept into the atmosphere.

By the time they reached Quayling he had apparently succeeded, for he turned to her quite naturally as they stood outside the door and said:

"Now to rouse the household and get some breakfast. My man will get rather a shock at our arrival at this ungodly hour of the morning."

But if it was a shock, Brayton, the impeccable man-

servant who had been Quayne's devoted henchman for years, succeeded in concealing it admirably. It might have been quite the usual thing for the master of the house to arrive, accompanied by an unknown lady, at half-past five in the morning, and demanded that breakfast should be served as quickly as possible. The accomplishment of the latter was certainly an achievement on Brayton's part. In record time the table was laid, and coffee and bacon and eggs appeared almost as though by magic. Meanwhile Quayne himself had telephoned to Lorne, explaining what had occurred, and returned to Jill with the news that the Brabazons were sending a car to fetch her home at once.

"You'd better go straight to bed when you get back," he observed gruffly, "and make up for all the sleep you missed last night."

"I didn't miss much," ventured Jill. "It was you who didn't sleep. You—watched." She wanted to thank him—to express in some way how much she felt she owed him.

"Have some more bacon?" he said, ignoring her remark entirely, and, feeling somewhat snubbed, she let him help her to some more, although she felt rather as though the next mouthful would choke her.

Reaction was setting in after the mental and physical strain of the preceding hours, and when at length the Brabazon car arrived she experienced an odd sense of relief. Whatever Quayne might have accomplished as far as his own inner feelings were concerned, she herself was still conscious of a sense of disturbance, of being keyed up to a pitch of extraordinary sensitiveness.

"Good-bye," she said, holding out her hand as she

stood with her foot on the step of the car. "I can't thank you properly——"

"Don't!" he interrupted brusquely. "There's no need. Good-bye."

For a moment she felt his hand close round hers in a hard, tense grip, and the memory of that time when he had said good-bye to her as she sat in the taxi outside the Chat Noir rushed sharply over her. Then he released her hand abruptly, and an instant later the car was bearing her swiftly down the drive.

Quayne remained on the doorstep, watching until it had disappeared from sight. Then slowly he made his way back into the house, into the room where they had just breakfasted together, and stood quite still looking down at the white-clothed table, laid for two. His expression was enigmatic.

CHAPTER VIII

"THE HUNDREDTH MAN"

HOW I wish you weren't an artist, Jill!" It was a few days later when Lady Susan burst out with this remark at the end of the morning's sitting for her portrait. Jill looked at her wonderingly.

"But why? Aren't you—pleased with the picture?" she asked rather wistfully.

"Pleased?" Lady Susan rose from the fine old carved chair in which she had been posing while Jill painted, and, coming over to the girl's side, slipped a plump, friendly arm round her shoulders. "That's just it," she said. "You've got this wonderful gift, so that no one really has a right to take complete possession of you. If you were merely just an ordinary girl, I should like you to come and live with me altogether. And of course"—with a sniff—"it's precisely the thing I can't have, fate having arranged quite differently."

Jill bent forward and kissed the troubled face.

"No, I couldn't come to you altogether, dear Lady Susan, because I must work," she said. "I can't quite explain it, but somehow I feel I *must*. It's in me and I simply can't bottle it up. But I'll come to you as often as I possibly can—if you really want me."

"If I really want you!" snorted Lady Susan. "My dear"—holding the girl a little away from her—"there'll be other people besides me who'll 'really want you'—and

who will go on asking for what they want until you give it to them."

"I suppose you're thinking of my marrying?" returned Jill. "That won't affect me. I can't imagine caring enough for any man to give up my work for him."

"He mightn't want you to do that. He might have more sense of fair play—there's a man here and there with a streak of it in him."

Jill smiled.

"Aren't you rather severe?" she suggested.

Lady Susan shook her head. Her eyes were somewhat sad.

"No, not severe, only old, Jill—an old woman who has gone through life with her eyes open. Ninety-nine men out of a hundred haven't the remotest idea of downright fair play with a woman—least of all, after they're married. There's no need for it, then, you see." It was not uttered bitterly, only with the quiet acceptance of facts "of an old woman who had gone through life with her eyes open."

"In that case it's quite disgraceful of you to suggest that I should spoil a perfectly good career by getting roped into matrimony," chided Jill laughingly.

"But there's always the hundredth man, my dear," said Lady Susan, her eyes softening wonderfully. "The man who *is* a man. And if he comes along, I'd say to any woman whom he loved and who loved him: Marry him—and don't give a twopenny damn for anything else in the world."

The words lingered curiously in Jill's mind, recurring to her at odd moments. She was perfectly sure that she could never care enough for any man to give up her art for him. The mere fact that he could *want* her to give

it up would somehow raise a barrier between them.

Meanwhile she was finding life at Lorne distinctly interesting. The portrait was progressing satisfactorily and, beyond that, Sir Philip and Lady Susan had both grown very fond of her. She had quickly learned that the former's brusque and rather hectoring manner concealed one of the kindest and most generous hearts in the world, and that, behind the frequent passages of arms which occurred betwixt him and Lady Susan, there lay a real love idyll—the idyll of a man and woman who had risked the great adventure of life when, for both of them, the shadows were already lengthening. Nor had they ever regretted it.

For Lady Susan herself Jill had conceived almost a daughter's affection. The bluff, breezy woman, with her sound common sense, peppered with humour, and her frank, clear vision with its occasional wistful tendernesses, appealed to her enormously, and for that alone she was glad that her work as an artist had brought her to Lorne.

But, perhaps, almost unconsciously to herself, it was the comings and goings of Straton Quayne which had added a new savour to life. Since the night of their adventure at Coryton Point, he had become a frequent visitor at Lorne, and Lady Susan, in spite of her intermittent diatribes on men and matrimony, was true woman *au fond* and lost no opportunity of throwing the two together. She was charmed with the Coryton Point episode—the romance, not the impropriety from a conventional point of view, was all that she could see in it —and still more charmed when one day they regaled her with an account of their first meeting in the fog.

"I suppose it's perfectly natural," she said, "that two

rather exceptional people should get to know each other in a rather unusual way. It would have been altogether too banal if one of our most brilliant novelists and a well-known artist"—with a mischievous smile at each—"had been merely introduced to each other in someone's drawing-room."

So that Quayne frequently lunched or dined at Lorne and strolled in the beautiful old gardens with Jill, discussing, in the way which comes so easily when two people are alone together and in sympathy, all the big and little things of life. Sometimes he called for her in his car and drove her through winding Devonshire lanes, so narrow that the lush growth of the hedges brushed the sides of the car as it slid along between them, right out on to the wide spaces of Dartmoor—crossed here and there with roads like broad white ribbons—where the great grey tors spired up to the blue sky overhead. At other times he would take her out in a boat—a shining new one that had replaced the one which the seas had dashed to pieces the night he found her on Coryton Point—and they would pull round the coast, landing at some small cove or inlet and lunching picnic fashion.

It was on one of these occasions, when the tide was out, that they disembarked at Coryton Cove, a tiny bay which lay to one side of the great promontory jutting out from the mainland, on which they had spent that memorable night.

Jill shivered a little as her searching eyes discovered the ledge on which those long hours had been passed.

"It's a bit better being below here, isn't it?" remarked Quayne, his glance taking the same direction.

"It is," she agreed warmly. "Looking up from here,

I can't imagine how you ever managed to climb up to that ledge."

He regarded the towering cliff reflectively .

"Perhaps, without knowing it, I was subconsciously aware that it was you who were lying there," he said at last, deliberately.

Jill flushed a little.

"Even then, I don't see——" she began uncertainly.

"Don't you? Oh, Jill, little Jill, will you ever see, I wonder? Haven't you realised—guessed?"

"Guessed?" Her voice was very low and a trifle tremulous. "Guessed—what, Straton?"

He drew closer, and the fire that had been smouldering in his deep-set eyes leapt suddenly into flame.

"That I love you? Haven't you seen it? I should have thought I'd made it clear enough these last few days."

"I knew—of course I knew that you liked me," she faltered. "But I thought it was just as a friend."

"As a friend! Good God! Jill, you're not being honest. The other night—that night on Coryton Point, I knew I loved you then. And you, didn't *you* know, too? Or are you merely pretending, like all other women do?" He spoke passionately, bitterly demanding, and his grey eyes blazed down into hers as though they would wrench the truth from her.

"No, no—really, Straton," she protested. "I didn't *know.* That night—oh, that night it was different. We were in danger. Any man might—might kiss a woman at a moment like that. And though, sometimes, I've thought—wondered a little, I was quite sure in the end that it had meant nothing. You—you have always spoken of women as though you hated them."

"I've never spoken to you as though I hated you, have I?" he said dryly.

She shook her head.

"No. You've always been good to me."

"Then be good to me! Jill, I love you—love you as a man only loves once in his life. Say that you'll marry me?"

She drew away, staring up at him white-faced, with startled eyes.

"Oh, no—no, I couldn't marry you, Straton, I'm so sorry! I—I couldn't marry anyone."

"Why not?" The question came sharp and hard as a bullet.

"I told you long ago that I should never marry. I'm an artist first and a woman after. And people who are made like that shouldn't marry."

He drew nearer to her, and, laying his hands on her shoulders, forced her to face him, although she avoided his glance.

"I'm not going to take 'no' as easily as that, Jill," he said, and there was something very forceful and determined in his voice. "Look at me. Look at me, I say," he repeated as her white lids still remained lowered, shielding her eyes from the intense demand in his. Slowly she raised them, reluctantly obeying him. "Now, can you look me straight in the face and say that you don't care—that I mean nothing more to you than any other man?"

She hesitated. During the last few days she had come to realise that Quayne meant more to her than she had believed it possible that any man could ever mean, but she had fought against it with all her strength. She did not want to marry. She wanted to keep her freedom,

and everything within her rose up in resistance against the domination of this man. She had been a free-lance all her life and she would remain one. But it was with an effort that she answered him.

"I don't care—like that," she said difficultly. "I don't care enough to marry you."

He regarded her intently, with eyes that seemed to search her very soul.

"Is that true?" he said.

She assented silently.

"Your work comes first?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe it," he said grimly. "Nor do you, if you would be honest with yourself, and some day I shall come first and your work second."

He released her, and, turning away to where the hamper which they had brought with them lay on the sand a few paces from them, he began unstrapping it.

"And that being settled," he remarked calmly, "suppose we have lunch?"

Jill was conscious of a slight shock. Straton Quayne was so amazingly unlike other men she had known. He seemed able to change his mood at will—at one moment demanding her love with eyes and voice which barely held in check the passion that burned behind his words, the next, unpacking the picnic hamper and coolly suggesting that they should have lunch!

And throughout the rest of the afternoon no one could have told from his demeanour that anything unwonted had occurred between them. Quayne was just his usual self, talking, sometimes brilliantly, sometimes with the whimsical humour she had learned to know as part of him, and sometimes with that undercurrent of

bitter cynicism of which she had never found the source.

That night she lay long awake, puzzling over the experiences of the day. From his complete detachment throughout the latter part of the afternoon, one might almost have concluded that her refusal to marry him did not affect him very poignantly. Yet deep down within her Jill knew that it did, that he loved her with all the strength and passion of a man to whom for some reason love appeared as an enemy—who had fought against it, but unavailingly.

She could hardly analyse her own attitude. All she knew was that the feeling she had for Garry Lester was something utterly different—infinitely less—than that which she felt for Straton. She had always put the idea of marriage outside her life, setting her beloved art in its stead. It had been easy enough to say "no" to Garry, but the "no" which she had given Quayne to-day seemed to have been dragged out of her very soul. And it had left a raw wound behind it.

CHAPTER IX

THE BLACK PANTHER

JUNE had come. To Jill, armed with basket and scissors and occupied in robbing the rose-garden of its white and pink, its golden-yellow and crimson treasure, it seemed as if June had come especially to Devonshire. Nowhere else, surely, was such a sky—deep sapphire overhead, paling to faintest chalcedony blue on the far horizon; nowhere such a riot of flowers—tapestry of gorgeous colours flaming against the green of tree and shrub; nowhere such warm, scented air, where rose and carnation, cherry-pie and mignonette made the drawing of each breath a draught of sweetness.

Her portrait of Lady Susan was so nearly finished that soon she must be returning to London, to hot pavements which smelt of tar and streets that reeked of petrol. Instead of the impulsive fluting of birds, breaking from green hidden places in the trees, there would be the roar of traffic, punctuated by the shrill cry of the newspaper-seller as he passed, and dull vistas of brick and stone-built houses would be substituted for the warm red soil of Devon, with its fields of growing grain and pasture and the dear, thatched cottages which she had learned to love.

So absorbed was Jill in mentally drawing the contrast in surroundings which a few days must inevitably bring her that she failed to hear the click of the garden

gate and footsteps approaching over the grass, and when a gay and debonair voice broke suddenly across her musings, she started and dropped her basket, spilling its garnered sweetness across the grey stone flags.

"You!" she exclaimed, looking up with astonishment into Brett Forrester's amused face. "How you startled me! I'd no idea you were coming here."

"Nor had anyone else," he answered, as he helped her to pick up the scattered roses. "But it's quite charming to see you again, dear lady of pictures. I was afraid you'd have returned to London by now."

"So I shall have done in a few days," she responded mournfully. "I wish Devon didn't make one grow so fond of it; I shall simply hate leaving the place."

"Then don't do it," he counselled cheerfully. "I never do anything I don't like, if I can help it. That's my philosophy of life. It's beautifully simple."

"Beautifully simple for you, but, from all I've heard, not quite so simple for the other people concerned."

Brett's face darkened.

"Do a man's mistakes—sins, if you like—follow him always, then?" he asked.

Jill raised her candid blue eyes to his face.

"No, you know I don't believe that. But I think I can guess why you've come to Lorne."

"Why?" he demanded challengingly.

"Because Lady Susan has asked Hazel down for the week-end. I suppose you've seen her in town and she told you she was coming here."

He shook his head.

"I haven't seen her since I was here last."

"Then you must write to each other!" flashed out Jill.

"Yes. We do. Have you any objection? Not that you have any right to have any objection."

"Only the right of a friend to make sure that someone she loves isn't going to be hurt."

"You've said that to me before. Why should you think that I would hurt Hazel? What do you know?"

For a moment Jill hesitated, nervously fingering the roses in her basket. Then she spoke with a quiet decision.

"Lady Susan told me how you treated Ann Lovell. You thought you were in love with her and you tried to *force* her to marry you."

Brett coloured underneath his tan.

"Well, can't you believe that I've learned wisdom since then? That was a different kind of love I had for Ann Lovell. I swear I wouldn't hurt a hair of Hazel's head—I'm on my knees to her."

"And if she refuses to marry you?"

"Do you mean, shall I try force?"

She bent her head.

"Yes."

"Then—no, I shall not. I want from Hazel only what she is willing to give me. I shall abide by what she says."

A little sigh of relief escaped Jill's lips.

"I believe you were afraid," he said.

"Yes," she answered simply. "I was—just a tiny bit."

"Very well, then, I'll be quite frank. I did come to Lorne because I knew that Hazel was going to be here," he went on. "Are you still—afraid?"

Her eyes scanned his face searchingly. If she had known the Brett Forrester of several years ago she would

infallibly have recognised the difference which a real love, and all that had happened in connection with his attempt to force Ann Lovell's hand, had made in him. He had never forgotten the other woman involved in that matter, Cara Hilyard, who had risked everything because of her love for another man—because of her desire to bring him happiness at no matter what sacrifice to herself. And somehow that and Ann Lovell's own pluck had combined to change his entire attitude towards women. But, in spite of her ignorance of this alteration in the man, Jill was still able to find nothing in his face that need cause her fear.

"No," she said at last, "I'm not afraid, Brett."

"Is it—friends, then?" he asked, holding out his hand, with a smile that was rather irresistible. Virtue had not sufficed to rob Brett Forrester of his charm—that charm which, even in his most reckless and irresponsible days, had always earned him forgiveness, even from the women he had most injured.

Jill's hand slipped confidently into his.

"Friends, Brett," she said.

A telegram received from Hazel—*"Arriving Lorne about six-thirty"*—threw the household into confusion.

"But there's no train at that time," objected Lady Susan. "She *can't* be arriving then! I don't know what to do about sending to meet her."

"It's a mistake, I expect," growled Sir Philip testily. "Those post office girls are damned careless—thinking far more about their young men than the telegrams they've got to send off." He always liked to find a place where the blame could be conveniently laid.

"Oh, I don't agree, Philip," replied Lady Susan.

"They're rather wonderful, I always think. I'm sure if I had to send off the amount of telegrams they do I should get hopelessly confused."

"Probably you would," he assented grimly.

"Let me have a look at the wire," suggested Brett, and upon Lady Susan's handing it to him, he pursued: "She doesn't say anything about wanting to be met at the station. 'Arriving Lorne'—presumably she's coming by car."

"Has she a little car of her own, dear?" Lady Susan asked helplessly of Jill.

The latter shook her head.

"No," she said, smiling. "Hazel's finances don't exactly run to a car."

"But she might have some friends who happened to be coming to Devonshire and who had given her a seat in theirs," suggested Brett sensibly.

"That's it." Lady Susan heaved a sigh of relief. "I believe you've solved the riddle, Brett."

"Intelligent young man," murmured Jill *sotto voce*. But Forrester heard and scowled horribly at her, until the scowl melted into a mutual grin of amusement.

And towards evening, just as he had surmised, a small car, with suit-cases strapped at either side, came whirling up the drive, with Hazel seated on the left-hand of the driver, and at the wheel—of all unexpected people—Garry Lester.

"And where are you going on to, Mr. Lester?" inquired Lady Susan, after general greetings had been exchanged.

Garry looked a trifle embarrassed.

"Oh, any old where—I don't mind," he replied airily.

"But I'll be here prompt on Tuesday to run Hazel back to town."

"You've no fixed programme, then?" asked Lady Susan.

"None whatever, except to convey Hazel safely back to the arms of her respected parent at the appointed time."

"In that case, why not remain here? Do. I should be so pleased."

"May I?" Garry's grey-brown eyes twinkled as he continued with the charming impudence which was so characteristic of him: "That's just what I hoped you'd say, Lady Susan."

Hazel hastily apologised for him.

"He's got cheek enough for anything," she interposed. "I entirely decline to accept any responsibility for him."

Everyone laughed, and Lady Susan slipped a kindly arm round the girl's shoulders.

"I think Garry—may I call you that?" she added with a nod in Lester's direction—"is the kind of young man who will get through life quite successfully without apologies."

"When I meet really understanding people like you, Lady Susan," he answered with a gay smile and bow.

Dinner was a lively meal. Even Sir Philip thawed a trifle, and Lady Susan, surrounded by so many young people, was in her element.

"I only wish Tony and his wife were here!" she exclaimed once, and then glanced rather anxiously towards her husband, fearing that perhaps she had been indiscreet in her impulsive reference to his nephew. In the days when the latter had lived with his uncle, there had been constant war between them. Tony Brabazon had been

a reckless young gambler, always getting into debt, and many and violent had been the rages this unfortunate tendency had provoked in the old man. Moreover, Sir Philip had been very anxious that Tony should settle down to the management of the estate, though without permitting him any of the authority due to the actual future owner of it. As Tony used to complain with exceeding bitterness: "I just have to see his orders carried out, and trot about with him, and do the noble young heir stunt for the benefit of the tenants on my birthday."

It was a bad life for any boy to lead, particularly when he had ambitions of his own which were constantly being thwarted, and it nearly ended in uttermost disaster. Fortunately, at this juncture a very charming young woman appeared on the horizon and swept Tony off his feet, and Sir Philip had finally given a grudging consent to their marriage—grudging because the girl in question was somewhat delicate. But even this proved to be a blessing in disguise. Her health necessitated their living abroad, so that they had ultimately made their home on the southern coast of France, where Tony was now working hard, running a flourishing flower and fruit farm.

Much as he had bullied him, however, his nephew had been in reality the apple of Sir Philip's eye. He missed him terribly, and that was why Lady Susan wondered if her impulsive reference to his absence from Lorne had been rather like putting a finger on a raw wound. But Sir Philip remained apparently unmoved. Perhaps he had learned that mute and stoical acceptance of the many partings in life which is one of the sad endowments of old age.

"The boy's better where he is," he said quietly, and went on with his dinner.

Afterwards, when they were all having their coffee on the terrace outside, Straton Quayne strolled up through the garden and joined them. Jill flushed a little in the moonlit dusk as she watched his tall figure approaching. Since the day when he had asked her to marry him and she had refused, he had continued to visit at Lorne precisely as usual—imperturbable and nonchalantly self-possessed, and somehow this outward impassivity frightened her a little. It was like the silent certainty of hidden strength.

"I motored across," Quayne explained to Lady Susan, sure of a welcome from the warm-hearted châtelaine of Lorne. "Quayling's a bit lonesome at night—no one to exchange views with except Brayton and his wife. So may I join the party, please?"

"Of course you may," replied Lady Susan cordially. "I suppose your neighbours at the Chace are still in town?" she went on conversationally.

"I believe so. Not that I think Lady Farnby would be exactly calculated to enliven depression of spirits."

"I wasn't thinking of Lady Farnby, but of Iris. I think she's so charming," added Lady Susan with a swift upward glance at Quayne's face. It remained perfectly impassive.

"I believe that opinion is very general," he returned indifferently.

Lady Susan breathed a soundless sigh of relief. It had delighted her to see that he had been attracted by her beloved Jill, and she was proportionately relieved to hear the utter lack of interest in Iris Lethbridge betrayed by his voice.

"Now, let me see," she said, "I think you know everyone here except Mr. Lester."

The two men acknowledge her introduction rather curtly. An odd shock of mutual antagonism seemed to pass between them. As Hazel remarked to Jill, later on, when they were alone:

"Lady Susan might have been making an introduction between a black panther and a tiger."

"Which of them was the black panther?" asked Jill idly.

"Garry," returned Hazel promptly. "He looked very black—and very pantherish."

For the moment, however, there was nothing but that almost imperceptible clash of unconscious hostility betwixt the two men. The general conversation ran smoothly on and presently turned upon Jill's picture, "The Uncounted Third."

"It's creating quite a furore in town," declared Garry. "Everyone wants to know what it means. What *did* you mean, Jill?"

Jill smiled.

"I should have thought it was perfectly clear," she said. "Doesn't everybody guess the meaning?"

"We all guess, my dear," said Sir Philip. "But the significance to each one of us may be rather different."

"Which *is* the 'uncounted third,' anyway?" asked Hazel.

There was an odd, enigmatic expression in Jill's eyes as she replied gently:

"That's a question which each man can only answer for himself, I think."

"You cynical little beast, Jill!" commented Garry energetically.

"It does sound cynical," agreed Quayne. "Are you inferring that there is an 'uncounted third' in every man's life?"

Jill's grave blue eyes dwelt on his face a moment.

"Isn't there?" was all she said.

"Don't probe too deeply, Jill," warned Lady Susan laughingly, "or we shall find all the men getting up with one accord to run away."

Everyone joined in her jolly laughter, and the slight sense of strain and gravity which had crept into the conversation vanished. Later on, as the evening cooled, they all retreated into the house, and Lady Susan suggested a visit to the impromptu studio where Jill worked.

"The electric lighting is pretty good there, and you'll get quite a fair idea of the portrait," she said, as she led the way.

They followed her, laughing and chatting as they went, and when the lights were switched on in the big room, there stood the picture, facing them, on its tall easel. A whisper of admiration ran through the group. Although not yet quite finished, the portrait was extraordinarily good. It showed Lady Susan seated in a fine old chair, her elbow resting on one of its arms and her cheek leaning lightly against her hand. At her feet lay two of the Tribes of Israel. They had proved extremely troublesome sitters, but, as Jill said, no portrait of Lady Susan could have been considered representative if all the members of the Tribes had been excluded from it.

"It's very good, isn't it?" remarked Hazel to Brett Forrester, who happened to be standing next her.

"Amazingly. She's got my revered aunt to a T," he returned.

"You needn't say 'amazingly,'" chided Lady Susan.

"It's not a bit 'amazing'—Jill just couldn't do anything else. If she painted you, Brett, I'm certain she'd reveal all the wickedness that lies behind that misleading smile of yours."

Lady Susan adored her nephew, notwithstanding the many backslidings from the path of virtue with which his past was littered. She had been through a good deal on his account at different times, and possibly she understood him better than anyone else and had caught glimpses of the little bit of gold in him which lay hidden amongst the dross—as it does in many so-called "black sheep."

"Then I shall refuse to sit for Jill, regardless of how much she presses the matter," announced Brett in indignant tones.

"I don't imagine she'll press it very hard," observed Garry dryly.

"I didn't know you were a painter of souls," pursued Brett, turning to Jill. "I thought you merely gave your attention to our outer selves."

She smiled at him.

"But if I paint your 'outer selves' properly, I'm bound to paint your inner selves as well. They're too much mixed up to separate them," she explained. "Besides, no portrait would be worth the name if it only painted a sort of outward mask. It wouldn't *be* a portrait if it didn't get at your individuality."

Brett listened solemnly.

"I think there's probably a lot of truth in what you say," he replied. "So much, that I shall take very good care never to risk being permanently given away by you on canvas. My beloved aunt gives me away quite often enough without that!"

"Now, haven't any of you any parlour-tricks?" demanded Lady Susan, as they all trooped out of the temporary studio. "*You* have, I know," she said, addressing Garry. "You sing."

"But not in public, dear Lady Susan," he declared. "I only babble away when Jill's painting. You might not think it," he went on confidentially, "but my singing is one of her sources of inspiration."

"Not it!" scoffed Jill. "It's more often a perfect nuisance. All the same, he can sing, Lady Susan—really quite decently."

"Then he shall do it," replied Lady Susan. "We'll go into the music-room."

The music-room at Lorne was a fairly high one, with parquet flooring and entirely devoid of the heavy curtains with which some people seem to make a point of swaddling up their rooms. It was therefore excellent from an acoustic point of view, and beautiful old rugs and easy chairs combined with a bank of flowers in the low fireplace to give it a comfortable "homey" appearance.

Rather reluctantly Garry went to the piano. He disliked intensely performing to a mixed gathering of people, although he would play and sing for hours to one or two sympathetic souls. But on the present occasion he was sensitively conscious of the faint, veiled hostility which had run like a fine live wire betwixt himself and Quayne.

He began by playing Rachmaninoff, Debussy, and others of the moderns, and gradually, as he became absorbed in the music, his extreme consciousness of the one unsympathetic personality amongst his audience left him.

"Sing something, Garry," said Jill. And at the sound

of her voice he smiled and broke into the opening bars of "There's many ways of love."

> "But there's sure one way of loving which is fair,
> If you give and take alike, and share and share,
> Never grudge each other's work, or play, or laughter,
> That's a love will last through all your life—and after.
> O there's just one way to love!"

As the last notes of the mellow baritone voice dropped into silence on the wistful melody, a little sigh of satisfaction ran round the room.

"That's charming!" exclaimed Lady Susan with enthusiasm. "And it's true, too," she added thoughtfully, "which is more than you can say for the words of all songs. So many of them depict love as a happy sort meeting in a garden—with a sundial somewhere around if possible."

"There are other verses of the song with which I'm more in sympathy," declared Garry, looking quickly towards Jill, who deliberately avoided meeting his glance.

"Yes," observed Quayne. "It's asking a good deal of a man."

"And of the woman, equally," flashed back Lady Susan. "But then, she always *does* get asked for a good deal."

"My dear, I protest"—there was a twinkle beneath Sir Philip's fierce old brows as he spoke—"anyone might think I really ill-treated you."

A gale of laughter greeted this mild expostulation, since everyone knew that, fume and bluster as he might, Sir Philip was as wax in Lady Susan's tactful hands.

Later on, after Quayne had taken his departure, Lady Susan demanded suggestions for the week-end amusement.

"I'll let you all off church to-morrow," she said. "What would you like to do instead?"

"Bathe," said Brett, "in the morning, and a go-as-you-please afternoon." He did not look in Hazel's direction, but nevertheless a faint colour crept into her cheeks. Perhaps she guessed that for them a "go-as-you-please" afternoon meant a walk or drive alone together.

A chorus of acclamation greeted Brett's suggestion.

Lady Susan nodded.

"All right, so be it. And on Monday we'll picnic somewhere on Dartmoor. This fine weather's going to last, isn't it, Philip?"

"Not a sign of any change," he answered. "We're in for a dry time, I imagine."

"Very well, then. I'll ask Straton to join us—he seems rather bitten with loneliness just now."

"He's taking too long a holiday," said Hazel. "That's what's the matter with him. He said he was going out of town for a week or two's rest—and instead he's been down here nearly a month. He'd be far better at work again."

"That's one for him and two for yourself, my girl," jeered Garry. "You don't think we can't see through hopeful secretarial remarks of that description, do you?" he went on skilfully dodging the cushion she promptly threw at him.

"Anyhow, *you'd* be a lot better for even a *little* work," retorted she, laughing.

So, amid chaff and laughter and a criss-cross fire of "good nights," they all made their way up to bed.

But outside Jill's door Garry paused a moment. They were alone, the others having walked on towards the end of the corridor.

"What's Quayne to you, Jill?" he demanded, with a suddenness that brought a quick flush to her cheeks.

"Straton?" she said, faltering. "Why, nothing, of course."

He shook his head.

"I don't believe it. Lady Susan told me all about how he came to your rescue at Coryton Point. No man could spend a night alone with—you, and remain indifferent. Damn him!" he added savagely.

"Don't be a fool, Garry," said Jill, recovering her poise somewhat. "I'm not Circe or Helen of Troy, you know, merely——"

"Jill," he interpolated. "And 'merely Jill' is enough for most men. Tell me"—he bent forward—"did he ask you to marry him?"

She smiled a little.

"Our night on the cliff was much too uncomfortable and nerve-racking to be a suitable environment for a proposal," she replied.

"But since—since then?" he persisted, catching hold of her hands. She resisted him, trying to free herself, but he only held her the more firmly. "Answer me! Answer!" he reiterated.

"No, I won't answer you," she returned with spirit. "You've no right to ask such a question."

"Haven't I?" His grey-brown eyes had grown very dark and dangerously brilliant. Jill suddenly thought of fire glowing in the midst of onyx, and with the thought came the remembrance of what Hazel had said. Garry looked very pantherish just now. There was something in him that reminded her of a panther about to spring. "Haven't I?" he repeated. "I've the right of a man who loves you—and means to have you. If Quayne has pro-

posed, or does propose, you can dismiss him. I will never let you marry him—or any other man. You'll marry *me.*"

He bent his dark head and pressed his lips hard against her hands. Then, abruptly releasing her, he turned away and strode down the corridor to his own room.

CHAPTER X

HALF A LOAF

JILL was sitting at the foot of a steep rise in the ground, her knees drawn up almost to her small, pointed chin and her hands clasped round them, while her eyes rested dreamily on the glorious expanse of the moor which stretched away to the horizon. A heathery, purple-blue moor, splashed with the yellow gold of gorse, undulated away on every side. Here and there, grim and silent, like lonely giant sentinels, uprose the big tors, towering against a blue sky flecked with floating clouds, fleecy and white. As they passed, their shadows flitted silently across the grass beneath, almost to Jill's very feet.

"I think I should like to take a 'bus-man's holiday,'" she remarked suddenly.

Quayne, lying full-length at her side, his chin on his hands, pipe in mouth, looked up with a flicker of amusement in his eyes.

"As how?" he inquired.

She gestured towards the other members of the party a little distance away. Lunch was over and everybody was lounging comfortably on the grass, smoking and chatting.

"Why, instead of picnicking here with all you nice people, I should like to be putting that"—again she gestured, this time towards the vista of moor in front of her—"on to canvas."

A slight shadow crossed Quayne's face.

"Your work never seems to be out of your mind," he commented discontentedly. "Can't you ever put it aside, like I can mine, and forget it?"

"Not quite in the same way. You see, the moment an artist sees a scene like this he wants to catch it, then and there, and pin it down to canvas, so to speak. While you, if some incident strikes you, suggesting an idea for a story, can stow it away in your mind, make a note of it when you get home, and keep it for future use."

Quayne nodded.

"You're rather an understanding person," he said quietly. "What you say is quite true." Then, abruptly, after a pause: "When do you go back to London, Jill?"

"About the end of the week, I think," she answered a trifle absently, her eyes still absorbing the beauty which surrounded her.

"And you're quite sure that your work is always going to be a barrier between us?"

She flushed.

"It must be," she said.

"Very well," he replied philosophically. *"Che sarà sarà."*

His impassivity piqued her a little. It is one thing to refuse to marry someone, but it is quite another if that someone accepts his *congé* with imperturbable calm. It's more than feminine human nature can be expected to support.

"You don't seem to mind—much," Jill was pricked into saying.

"Don't I?" His deep-set eyes met hers and she turned her face quickly aside. There was no misreading the vehement demand they held. It shook her, made her feel

uncertain of herself, and she felt thankful when Lady Susan's voice came blithely across to them.

"If you good people think I'm going to let you lie peacefully here for the rest of the afternoon, you're very much mistaken. After the enormous lunch you've all eaten"—with a nod in the direction of the empty hampers—"a walk will do you good. I propose we climb that tor over there. There's a most gorgeous view from the top—you can even catch a glimpse of the sea from it. And I want to make a good impression of Dartmoor upon Jill, because she's never seen it before."

"You've done that already, Lady Susan," replied Jill. "It's—it's wonderful. I'd no idea it was anything like this."

"Of course you hadn't. Probably, like several other people I've met, you imagined it a sort of flat pancake of rough moorland!"

Jill scrambled to her feet. She was glad of the interruption to her *tête-à-tête* with Quayne, and gladly strolled across to the main group of the party.

"No, I wasn't as bad as that," she declared, laughing. "I've read about Dartmoor, even if I've never seen it before. But I'd love to climb one of the tors."

"You'll love it by the time you've reached the top," murmured Garry sarcastically, as she approached.

"Is it so bad to climb?"

"You'll see, in due course," he answered. "However, come along. If Lady Susan says we've got to go, of course, go we shall!" he added, giving his hostess a wicked upward glance of his grey-brown eyes.

Lady Susan beamed at him.

"You've got the right spirit, Garry. Now, Philip, come along. You've been dozing in the sun quite long

enough; you'll be putting on weight if you slumber and sleep too much."

Sir Philip looked down at his angular figure, then shook his head.

"I don't think so, my dear—now I've got you to look after me," he remarked grimly.

Amid general laughter, in which Lady Susan joined as cheerily as anyone, they all set off in the direction of the great tor which lay some half-mile away, and gradually sorted themselves out into twos and threes. Brett was well away at the head of the little party, with Hazel beside him. Then came Sir Philip and Lady Susan, accompanied by Quayne, and last of all, bringing up the rear, Garry and Jill together.

It was a long half-mile to the tor itself, and when she began to climb the steep side of it, with its huge rocks looking as though some god at play had flung them down, higgledy-piggledy, and its awkward ridges and crevices covered by short, dry, slippery grass, Jill began to realise that Garry's sarcastic warning had contained nothing but the truth. One of her feet was hurting her, too, and she limped a little as she walked.

"Here, take my arm!" he said abruptly. "It's a stiffer pull up than you expected, isn't it?"

She nodded a trifle breathlessly, glancing despairingly at the others of the party, who were far ahead.

"Yes," she assented. "It's much steeper than it looks —and so frightfully slippery."

With Garry's help she made better progress, but even so, unusued to any form of climbing, she was very glad to fall in with his suggestion that they should stop and rest for a short time, before attempting the last lap of the climb. As soon as they had sat down she bent

forward and gingerly examined her foot, which seemed to have grown more and more painful with every step.

"What's the matter?" asked Garry. "Does your foot hurt?"

"'M, it does, rather," she acknowledged. "It feels as if I were walking on a nail."

"Sounds pleasant," he commented. "Let me take off your shoe and see what's wrong. If it's a nail pricking you, I can probably hammer it back into its place with a stone."

As he spoke, he knelt beside her and, swiftly unbuttoning the strap of her shoe, took it off.

"What an absurd thing to wear on Dartmoor!" he exclaimed disparagingly. "Haven't you any brogued walking-shoes you could have put on?"

"I don't possess any," confessed Jill meekly. "You know walking isn't my strong card, so to speak."

"I should say not," he agreed. Meanwhile, he was prodding about inside the toe of the shoe with his fingers, and presently he withdrew his hand and held out for her inspection a minute particle of granite reposing on the tip of his forefinger.

"That's the cause of the trouble," he said triumphantly. "Let me look if it's cut your stocking"—taking her foot in his hand. "Yes, it's just made a tiny hole."

"Which will grow bigger and bigger, of course," groaned Jill unhappily.

"Well, you shouldn't wear such ridiculous silk stockings for a tramp on the moor," he returned. "Even your skin is cut," he added as a tiny thread of scarlet showed itself through the hole.

The slender foot he held stirred a little against his palm as she bent forward to examine the damage. It

felt soft and yielding, like a frightened caught bird that lies palpitating in the hand. Suddenly he stooped his head and pressed his lips against the tiny wound.

"Oh, Jill—Jill!" he cried in a smothered voice.

She was silent. There was something touchingly boyish in the muffled, half desperate tones, and her heart went out to him in a rush of sympathy. In this mood she wasn't afraid of Garry. It was only on those too frequent occasions when his temper and passion mastered him that she felt herself all at once weak and helpless and unable to cope with him. She laid her hand half caressingly on the crinkly brown hair of his downbent head.

"Garry, my dear, I'm so sorry. Because it's no use—less use now than ever."

At her words he lifted his head so abruptly that her hand was violently flung back.

"Less use than ever?" he repeated, every atom of boyishness gone out of his voice. "What do you mean, Jill? Has anything happened?"

"No," she answered simply. "Nothing has happened. But since I left London I've come to realise that—that there never could be anything between you and me, Garry."

"There will be!" he said between his teeth.

"No. You must believe me in this, now. Once I—I wasn't quite sure. You're rather tempestuous and rather a dear, you know, Garry"—with a little smile that was half humorous, half appealing—"and I'll admit that sometimes you nearly carried me off my feet. I think only my work held me back, then. But now, even if I weren't a painter, if there were nothing like that to keep us apart, I should never marry you."

Garry had remained on his knees beside her. He regarded her now with eyes in which there seemed to smoulder a slow fire that might at any moment break into fierce flame.

"And you've discovered all this since you left London?" he asked slowly.

She assented silently.

"Then," he said, in a kind of compressed voice, "it *is* Quayne who has come between us! The other night you refused to tell me if he'd asked you to marry him. Today you shall answer me another question. Do you care for him?"

"I'm not going to marry him, Garry," she replied, "if that's what you want to know."

"Oh, marry him! Marriage isn't the only way of love." Again something flared dangerously in his eyes—something unleashed from which she shrank away instinctively.

"Garry, don't talk like that!" she protested sharply, realising, too late, that one of his evil moods was upon him.

He gave a short, contemptuous laugh.

"Very well, I won't, if it offends you. But if you're afraid of the words, how would you face the reality?" He bent nearer to her, thrusting his face close to hers. "For I warn you, Jill, if you marry Quayne, or any other man, I shall simply take you away from him."

Jill drew back. She could feel his breath hot on her face.

"You would do nothing of the kind," she said, forcing her voice to steadiness. "I shouldn't go with you."

"Yes, you would," he persisted. "Because you wouldn't know you were going until it was too late for

you to return. I don't think"—scornfully—"Quayne's the type of man to take his wife back straight from another man's arms."

"Garry! I won't listen to you if you talk in this way. You make love, which should be the most beautiful thing in the world, into something ugly and horrible and sordid."

"Maybe I do," he rejoined stubbornly. "But in love, as in other things, half a loaf is better than none at all. Do you understand?"

"I'm going," cried Jill desperately. She made a movement to rise from where she sat, but in an instant she found herself prisoned, held fast by a pair of arms that felt like steel springs which slowly but surely bent her body backwards until she was half sitting, half lying on the ground, utterly powerless to move.

"No," said Garry, and there was a note in his voice that roused every apprehensive woman's fear within her. "No, you're *not* going. Oh, don't be frightened"—as he saw the milk-white face so close beneath his own, with blue eyes staring up at him affrightedly. "I only want to ask you a few questions—but I'll have my answer to them this time. I want to know if Quayne has asked you to marry him."

Jill remained silent, and felt the pressure of his grip upon her tighten.

"You're hurting me," she said at last, very quietly.

"Then answer my question," he returned grimly, not abating the pressure of his hands one whit. "Has Quayne asked you to marry him?"

At last, driven by the pain of his grasp, and yet more by the dogged tenacity of his gaze fixed immovably on hers, she murmured a faint affirmative.

"Huh! So he has!" commented Garry, in a low voice of fury. "I thought as much. And you've refused him?"

Again she signified assent.

"Why?" He slashed the word at her like a sword-thrust. "Don't you care for him?"

"I've told you—I'm not going to marry anyone."

"I didn't ask you that. Marriage"—again that look of deviltry in his eyes—"isn't everything. I asked you whether you cared for him."

She made no answer.

"Well?" he demanded.

Still she refused to speak. Instead, she struggled to free herself from his hold.

"Don't struggle," he advised her coolly. "It's quite useless pitting your strength against mine. I could hold you here till the crack of doom. Answer my question. Do you care for Straton Quayne?"

She turned her face aside to avoid meeting his eyes, while the blood rushed vividly into her pale cheeks.

"I can't—I *can't* answer it, Garry," she gasped weakly.

"Thanks, you've answered it all right," he said shortly. Without actually releasing her, he relaxed the firmness of his grip a little. "Now I know I'm up against the two of you. But I'll win out. Listen, Jill. I'd rather have you by fair means, but if I can't, I'll have you by foul. I swear it!"

He bent swiftly forward, gathered her up into his arms and rose to his feet, still holding her.

"And there's my pledge on that," he added.

In the same instant he almost lifted her from the ground, she felt his mouth close down on hers, and he was kissing her savagely, so that the hard pressure of his

lips seemed as though it must bruise her own. She was as helpless in his grip as a reed bent by the driving wind.

And just at that moment, without hint or warning, came the sound of a man's footsteps crunching on the sun-dried grass, and Quayne's tall figure appeared suddenly round the corner of a huge boulder which, to the right, had shielded them from view.

CHAPTER XI

WHICH DEALS WITH LOVE

JILL tore herself out of Garry's embrace. But it was too late. She knew that Quayne had seen them—*must* have seen them. Nevertheless, his expression betrayed nothing. He looked at them quite dispassionately, as though there had been nothing untoward in his discovery. Only anyone who knew him very well might have recognised a curious glint is his deep-set eyes which, with Straton Quayne, always signified intense feeling of some kind.

"Oh, here you are," he said casually. "It's a stiff climb to the top, isn't it? I've come back on my tracks to find Lady Susan's wrist-bag. She seems to have dropped it somewhere or other."

Jill pulled herself together.

"I wonder where?" she murmured, peering about behind small rocks and into crevices where the bag might conceivably have lodged. "Did you come up this way?"

"Past this identical rock," returned Quayne.

"Humph! It's a bit like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay," commented Garry, joining assiduously in the search.

A few minutes later a cry from Jill announced its discovery, and, the little satchel retrieved, she and the two men recommenced the ascent of the tor. The hunt for the bag had somewhat mitigated the embarrassment

caused by Quayne's unexpected appearance on the scene, and his manner was so tranquilly neutral as almost to indicate that he had observed nothing out of the ordinary.

It is astonishing how easily one can reassure oneself over any point if one really wants to. By the time they had reached the top of the tor and Lady Susan had expressed her delight over the recovery of her wrist-bag, Jill felt almost convinced that, after all, Quayne had not noticed anything and that she was worrying herself unnecessarily, nor was it until late in the evening that she learned her mistake.

It was after dinner, when they were all sitting on the terrace drinking their coffee, as usual, that the balmy warmth of the evening called forth from someone the suggestion that they should stroll down to the lake. A few steps sufficed to convince Jill, however, that the temporary soreness of her foot negatived the proposition from her own point of view. She was walking with Lady Susan and Sir Philip at the time, and the latter offered to accompany her back to the house. But she vetoed this at once.

"No, *please* don't," she protested. "I shall be quite happy by myself, resting and smoking in one of those nice chairs on the terrace."

Sir Philip, who loved his daily evening stroll with Lady Susan, acquiesced with inward satisfaction, although, to do him justice, the genuine kindliness of heart which lay behind his gruff exterior would have impelled him to forego it without a single grudging thought, if Jill had seemed anxious for someone to keep her company. So he and his wife continued their stroll, while Jill returned to the terrace, and, snuggling down into one of

the big cushioned chairs, lit a cigarette and sat quietly musing upon her surroundings.

Beauty, such as lay all about her here, affected her strongly. The stately old house, with that sense of atmosphere clinging to it which age alone bestows; the grave, tall dark trees etched blackly against the mysterious blue of the night sky; the tranquil silence of the evening, broken only by an occasional sleepy twitter of bird voices—all combined to give her that odd little ache of pleasure in her heart which only just escapes being pain.

A voice broke in abruptly upon her thoughts.

"I heard you had gone back, so I returned—nominally to keep you company." It was Straton speaking, and in his tone was a hard, dry note of irony.

Jill's slight figure tautened.

"Only—'nominally'?" she replied, with a tiny flicker of defiance. "Then you escaped under false pretences."

He made a step forward—a rough, quick step which sent some small stones that had crept in between the flags dancing across the terrace.

"And you, too," he said sternly, "*you* escaped under false pretences."

"False pretences? I don't understand."

"Don't you? Then perhaps"—contemptuously—"it will make matters clearer if I tell you that, quite accidentally, I saw you—you and Lester—this afternoon."

Jill's heart gave a leap, and she felt her lips go suddenly dry. Then she had been wrong, altogether wrong, in her surmise that he had not seen! She rallied her forces to meet the blow.

"Did you?" she said, speaking with forced lightness. "I'm so sorry, but I'm afraid it *doesn't* make matters

any clearer. I still don't see where 'false pretences' come in, on my part."

"In that case, I'll tell you." In the moonlight she could see his face clearly. It was curiously pale, and emotionless as a mask, save for the deep-set eyes which seemed to blaze down into hers. "The other day I asked you to be my wife—and you refused. You had a perfect right to refuse. But"—his voice deepened into bitter accusation—"you had no right to lie to me."

Jill sprang to her feet.

"I did *not* lie to you!" she exclaimed.

"You lied," he said steadily, still with that note of scorn in his voice which had characterised it from the beginning of the scene. "You told me that it was your work which stood between us—that you would never marry anyone. That I could understand. It was an honest answer—though a mistaken one."

"Well," interpolated Jill, her breath coming a trifle unevenly.

"'Well'? Can't you finish the rest for yourself? . . . It was Lester who stood between us—Lester for whom you care. Only of course you must needs take refuge in a falsehood. Why couldn't you have told me you cared for some other man?" He turned impatiently aside. "But you women never can play straight."

She stood very still and silent. She was hurt—hurt to the core of her—that Quayne could so have misjudged her. It was only after a long pause that she could force herself to answer him.

"I played perfectly straight, Straton. I—don't care for Garry. At least, not in the way you mean," she said, at last, quietly.

"Then why do you allow him to kiss you—like that?"

he retorted swiftly. "Or are you perhaps so modern that you give your kisses lightly?"

Jill flushed scarlet. Either way, either way he was going to put her out of court by his warped judgment. A sudden fury of resentment overwhelmed her—resentment mingled with hurt pride and a pain that stabbed like a knife.

"Perhaps it's that," she replied, on a queer little sharp high note that might have opened the eyes of any man other than a man blindly in love. "And, in any case," she went on coldly, "I'm not responsible to you for my actions."

"No," he said. "If you were, things would be very different, I can assure you."

"Possibly. But, as things are, please remember that what I choose to do or not to do is no affair of yours."

For an instant he stood staring down at her, his eyes stormy with anger, while her own glance, equally angry, met and clashed with his, defying it.

His hands clenched slowly, as though it called for his utmost strength not to give her back a retort as scathing as her own.

"You are right," he said at last, rather hoarsely. "It is no affair of mine." And, turning on his heel, he left her, alone in the moonlit dusk.

When he had gone she sank back into her seat and remained there, staring in front of her with blank, unseeing eyes. She felt horribly hurt, and in her mind she was conscious of an uneasy, restless questioning as to why Quayne's opinion of her seemed to matter so much.

She felt oddly afraid—afraid of something intangible and inexplicable which she did not understand. For all the worldly wisdom which the experiences of her some-

times sordid and always unsheltered existence had brought to her, much earlier than falls to the lot of most women, she was still, at heart, only a girl, wrapt up in her art and hitherto unconscious of the strange and implacable claim love makes. But it seems as though, when the wonder and miracle of love is approaching, some instinct, hidden deep within her, subconsciously warns every woman. It is as though she hears a footfall coming towards her along one of the unknown paths of life and cannot recognise it—and, not recognising it, she flinches affrightedly from the unknown.

In such vague fashion Jill was aware, after Quayne's abrupt departure, of a sense of tumult and confusion which she could not explain to herself—which left her feeling rather frightened and alone, and when the sound of voices heralded the return of the rest of the party from the lake, she rose eagerly and went to meet them.

"Where's Straton?" Lady Susan asked her briskly. "I thought he came back to look after you? He said he was going to."

"I think he's gone home," replied Jill as indifferently as she could.

Perhaps her voice betrayed something to Lady Susan's quick ears—she was as intuitive as one of her own adored dogs. At any rate, she accepted the statement without comment or further inquiry, and the evening passed off much as usual, with the exception that Lady Susan bustled everybody off to bed in good time, on the grounds of the early start Hazel and Garry must needs make the following morning.

Jill, according to custom, strolled into Hazel's room to smoke a last cigarette while the latter brushed her hair.

"You should have it shingled—no, bobbed, I think,"

counselled Jill, consideringly. "Bobbing's softer looking—it would suit you better."

It was an old argument between them regarding Hazel's soft masses of waving hair. This time Hazel shook her head very decidedly.

"No, I shall never cut off my hair, now," she said. Her eyes were shining with a soft glow, as though someone had lit a lamp in the brown depths of each of them.

Jill regarded her curiously.

"Why not?" she asked.

Hazel laid her brush down on the dressing-table and turned towards her with a smile trembling round her lips. She was a little flushed—pink, like a rose. There was something radiant about her.

"Because"—she hesitated, then brought it out with a rush—"because Brett doesn't want me to."

"Brett! What on earth has Brett to say about——" Jill checked herself suddenly as the realisation broke over her that in future Brett would have a great deal to say about everything that concerned Hazel.

"Oh, Hazel!" she exclaimed. "You've promised to marry him!"

"'M." Hazel nodded, blushing unmistakably this time. "I've been and gone and done it. But, listen, Jill. It's to be kept quite private for a little while. I don't want to go back to town and spring an engagement on mother, as it were. It would give her an awful shock. So we're going to keep matters quite quiet until she has met Brett and got to know him a bit."

Jill was silent for a moment. Thoughts were struggling in her mind for which she could find no means of expression—inarticulate, conflicting thoughts that seemed to pull in every direction. At last she got up, and cross-

ing the room to Hazel's side, kissed her gently—almost solemnly.

"I do hope you'll be happy, dear old thing," she said, her voice a trifle husky. Then impulsively she added: "I think it's awfully brave of you. Men are so—odd."

CHAPTER XII

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

THE summer was over and September had brought a sudden, sharp crispness into the air. A small fire crackled away on the hearth in Jill's big, workmanlike studio, and beside it Omar was industriously licking his coat into a superlative state of sleekness. Every now and again he paused in this praiseworthy occupation to regard his mistress with solemn, unblinking eyes. She seemed restless and fidgety this morning, now crossing the room to the window, now coming back to the fireside and lighting a cigarette at which she puffed with a kind of nervous eagerness.

Omar and Madelon had both welcomed her with delight on her return from Lorne, and she herself had seemed almost excitedly glad to be back again at the studio. But as the weeks had slipped along, adding themselves into months, they had both observed a change in her—Omar with the secretive Oriental calm which betrayed no sign of what he thought, Madelon with the shrewd insight of the Frenchwoman. Yet she, too, had the wisdom to keep her thoughts to herself. She was only rather puzzled that some new friend—a *monsieur très épris de sa jolie petite mademoiselle* had so far not presented himself at the flat. This fact did not dovetail with her idea of what lay at the root of the change she had noticed in her mistress. Where the latter had been wontedly in

good spirits she was now inclined to vary in her moods—over-excitable at times, at others very quiet and thoughtful.

To Jill herself the visit to Lorne seemed to have taken place in some remote past. It was like a little separate section of existence, cut out and placed on one side, which bore no relation to the rest of life. All the long hours she had spent with Straton Quayne—the night of danger they had passed together at Coryton Point, the comradeship which had built itself on this foundation, the sudden unlooked-for flash of something that was more than friendship—seemed now like a dream which had slipped itself in and between the ordinary ways of her life. There was nothing left of it—not even comradeship. After the quarrel between herself and Quayne on the day of the Dartmoor picnic, he had kept away from Lorne throughout the remainder of her stay there, nor had he made any attempt to see her since her return to London. And now it was September! Evidently, when Straton quarrelled with anyone, he did it very completely and effectually.

Nor did she hear any news of him. Hazel, who had only been working for him temporarily, while his own secretary was ill, had now, since the latter's return to duty, taken a fresh secretarial post to some philanthropic society. "Not half such interesting work, my dear," she told Jill, "as being secretary to a man like Quayne. But still, as the screw's good and I suppose I shall be married some time next year, it's quite all right as a 'carry-on' job."

Brett Forrester, with characteristic impatience, had wanted the wedding to take place as quickly as possible after Mrs. Kenyon had given her consent to the en-

gagement, and it was only at her request that it had been postponed until the following year.

Oddly enough, Hazel's mother, fragile and gentle though she was, liked Brett immensely. One would have expected her to recoil from his arrogant self-will, or that the reputation he had earned in earlier years for a daredevil recklessness that feared neither God nor man, provided he could gain his end, would have awakened all her distrust. But perhaps it was something in her very frailty, and the brave spirit which lay behind that frailty, which appealed to him, drawing from him an unexpected feeling of protectiveness and tenderness towards the little grey-haired woman who had put up such a plucky fight against the difficulties of life, and her sheer goodness seemed to bring out all that was best in him.

There was none of his characteristic arrogance when he asked her to give him Hazel. On the contrary, there was a certain boyish humility and ingenuousness that was rather appealing.

"I've never looked after anyone yet," he said, "and I don't know whether I should make any better job of it than other men do. But I believe I could, you know. Will you trust me to look after Hazel?"

And Mrs. Kenyon had been very sweet and kind to him, but she had nevertheless begged him to let her keep her daughter with her a little longer.

"I can't spare her just yet, Brett," she had said. "Later on, perhaps, it won't matter so much."

Brett, half divining her meaning, glanced at her sharply.

"Yes," she said simply, answering the interrogation in his eyes. "I went to one of the best specialists in town—it cost a dreadful price, but I felt I must know

the truth—and he told me it was only a question of months. But don't tell Hazel. I want to keep from her anything that might hurt her happiness just now."

And Brett, looking down into the delicately worn face, with the brown eyes, so like Hazel's own, now facing death as gallantly as they had faced life, felt a sudden, most unwonted tightening in his throat. He bent down abruptly and kissed the withered rose-leaf cheek.

"Oh, you plucky darling!" he exclaimed. "It shall be just as you wish. And will you try to believe that all my life I'll do my utmost to keep away anything that might ever hurt Hazel's happiness?"

"I do believe it," she had returned quietly. "If I didn't, I would never have given her to you."

Meanwhile, Garry Lester had gone away on a six weeks' cruise with some yachting friends and had not yet returned, the Brabazons did not propose coming back to town until the end of September, so that altogether Jill had found herself a trifle lonely of late and with rather too much time on her hands for thinking.

The only thing which had occurred to alleviate matters somewhat was that she had been commissioned to paint the portrait of Iris Lethbridge. Lady Farnby had seen her portrait of Lady Susan, and being quite as clever an old woman as she was disagreeable, had immediately recognised the brilliance of the work. Accordingly, she had commissioned Jill to paint her great-niece with a view to getting the portait hung in the Royal Academy the following spring. Iris had already passed her twenty-eighth year without acquiring a husband, and Lady Farnby was shrewd enough to know that in future any painting of Jill Wedderburn's was certain to attract considerable attention. She foresaw that a portrait of

Iris, painted by Jill, might be the means of recreating the same furore as that which had raged in earlier days over the beauty of her great-niece—just at the beginning of the season, the most auspicious time for the launching of a fresh campaign in husband-hunting.

As far as Jill was concerned, from the moment old Lady Farnby had introduced Iris to her as a prospective sitter, she had been anticipating painting this especial portrait with unusual enthusiasm. The girl was so really beautiful, with her flaming chestnut-red hair and dazzlingly clear skin—the snow-and-roses complexion which is so frequently to be found as an adjunct to that particular shade of red. And the appeal in the hyacinth-blue eyes—that misleading look of wistfulness which had proved the undoing of so many men—had called up all Jill's quick sympathy. She had heard a good deal of the gossip which clung around Iris's name, but something in those eyes of hers seemed to her to contradict the hard truth of general opinion.

The sitting had been fixed for ten-thirty on the morning when Omar, meticulously cleaning his coat in front of the fire, was observing at intervals in the process his mistress's restlessness. Frankly, Jill was beginning to feel slightly irritable. The church clock a little lower down the street had already struck eleven strokes, and still, as she peered out of the window, there was no sign of her expected sitter.

"Oh, damn!" she muttered, relighting her cigarette which she had almost squeezed to death between nervously working fingers. "I wish she'd come! The light's just perfect this morning. Omar, my son, I don't think this Miss Lethbridge can be at all a nice person to spoil things like this."

In Omar's topaz eyes, raised instantly at the sound of her voice, lay an odd look of speculation. Five minutes later a car purred to a standstill outside the block of flats and a slim figure descended from it, pausing for a moment to speak to someone evidently still remaining within. Then the car drove away.

Jill heard a light tap at the flat door, and, hurrying into the little hall, found someone just pushing it open.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," said Iris, emerging from behind it. "And"—with a charming smile—" as your door was on the latch I didn't know whether I was expected to walk in or not."

"It generally is," replied Jill, smiling. "There's a beautiful laxity about locking doors in these flats. You see," she continued, leading the way into the studio, "if you leave them ajar the milkman and people like that will put anything just inside for you, and most folks here haven't maids to keep on answering the door. Even for me it's much less trouble to leave it ajar, as my old French *bonne-à-tout-faire* goes out to do the shopping, and I don't want to be disturbed at my work when that happens."

While she was talking Iris had taken off her hat and slipped out of the fur coat which concealed the exquisite gown she was wearing—a shimmering tissue of gold, shot with vivid reds which glowed like her hair, and blues that matched her eyes. It was cut low, revealing her beautifully modelled throat and shoulders with the skin matt white and fine in texture as a child's.

Jill caught back an almost irrepressible little gasp of admiration. She could hardly wait. Everything that was artist in her clamoured to begin work on such a

model. But Miss Lethbridge appeared in no such hurry. She glanced round the room appreciatively.

"You've got a delightful studio here," she said. "And oh!"—as she caught sight of Omar—"what a perfectly gorgeous creature!"

She made a quick, impulsive movement forward to stroke his back, and Jill had time to notice the supple grace of her body—lithe as a cat's. Then came a sharp spitting sound and Omar was standing up, his ruff looking about twice its normal size as his fur rose, his big tail waving slowly from side to side like that of an angry tiger.

"Oh, he doesn't like me!" exclaimed Iris, withdrawing her hand hastily.

Jill regarded him with surprise.

"Omar!" she said. "Come here at once and make friends. How dare you spit like that at a visitor?"

No amount of cajoling, however, could win the big cat back to graciousness. He retreated into a corner and sat there, glowering at Iris with fierce, shining eyes, while an occasional threatening rumble in his throat witnessed the truth of her assertion.

"Don't pay any attention to him," advised Jill. "He'll soon come round. He can't bear being taken no notice of."

But she was wrong in her prediction. Omar did *not* come round. Throughout the whole sitting he remained aloofly in a corner, and it was not until the visitor had gone that he consented to resume his usual seat on the hearthrug.

It was precisely the same each time Iris visited the studio. Omar invariably retreated from her as far as possible.

"I really feel I ought to apologise for his behaviour," declared Jill, laughingly, one day. The portrait was almost finished now, and she was sitting at her easel, throwing quick, keen glances towards her model while she put in the final touches. "I've only once before known him to take such a dislike to anyone," she went on, thinking of Garry, who had received his usual hostile welcome from Omar upon his return from his yachting trip. "And in that case it happens to be a very intimate friend of mine."

"Man or woman," queried Iris negligently.

"Man."

"Then"—with that slow, lazy smile which Jill had learned to recognise as one of her attractive characteristics—"then his dislike of me isn't due to any prejudice against my sex."

"Oh, no," Jill answered rather abstractedly. She was growing absorbed in her work, and continued for so long without a pause that it was only when a somewhat weary voice drifted across to her from where Iris sat posed on a divan over which had been flung a tiger skin, that she realised how the time had run on.

"Don't you think I might have a rest now?" inquired Iris in a small, patient voice.

Jill flushed apologetically.

"I *am* so sorry!" she exclaimed contritely. "You must be tired out, but I so wanted to finish it to-day. Do get down from the platform and have a smoke while I make you a cup of tea. Madelon is out this afternoon, so I'll have to leave you for a few minutes while I get it ready."

She established Iris in an easy chair by the fire and placed cigarettes and matches at her elbow.

"I won't be long," she said as she bent her steps kitchenwards.

"I shall have a last attempt at making friends with Omar while you're gone," Iris called after her gaily as she departed.

The kitchen fire had burned very low, so Jill stoked it up and put the kettle on to boil while she busied herself cutting bread and butter and preparing the tea-tray. Once or twice her thoughts touched on Omar's odd dislike to Iris, but mostly they dwelt enthusiastically on the exquisite picture which the latter's portrait had made. And then, all at once, came the sound of footsteps in the hall. Someone had pushed the flat door open and entered. For a moment she thought it must be Madelon, returned earlier than she had anticipated. But the steps turned towards the studio. Followed a quick, decisive knock and then, as the door opened, came the sound of a voice which suddenly brought the blood to her face and sent her pulses racing violently.

"Iris! What are you doing here?"

It was Quayne's voice, and it held something beyond the mere surprise born of an unexpected meeting with an acquaintance—something of distaste, recoil.

"You? . . . Straton, is it you?"

There was a startled note in Iris's low, shaken tones, and again that something more than astonishment—a sudden vibrant emotion that jangled all its customary sweetness out of her voice.

"Ah! Don't go!" she continued swiftly. Evidently Quayne must have made some movement of withdrawal. Followed the light swish of a skirt. Jill, standing stock still in the middle of the little kitchen, could visualise that rapid, lithe rush of Iris's across the room to his side.

Probably, upon entering, he had halted just inside the threshold.

"Don't go—for pity's sake, don't go, Straton," she went on hurriedly. "I *must* speak to you."

"There can be nothing more to be said between us," came the reply, uttered with a sternness and contempt that was unmistakable.

"Ah!" It was like a cry—the desperate cry of something hurt and wounded. "Have you forgotten—so soon?"

The piteousness of those two last words! . . . Jill shivered. Her hand shaking, she put the teapot down hastily upon the scrubbed whiteness of the kitchen table. She must go—get away somewhere out of hearing of those two who had lost all consciousness of the fact that there was anyone else in the flat. She made a quick step towards the door, then checked herself abruptly. It was impossible to escape without their knowledge of her presence there—they must infallibly see her as she passed the open door of the studio. She was trapped—compelled to be an unwilling eavesdropper. To break in upon them now—to bring them violently back to the realisation that she was there, that they had been overheard—was utterly impossible.

Like a flash it had come to her that these two—the man and woman in the next room—were linked together by some intangible chain that stretched into the past. Once they must have loved. . . . Straton had loved—Iris!

CHAPTER XIII

THE WOMAN WHO DIDN'T COUNT

"HAVE you forgotten—so soon?"

The desolate cry seemed to wander lonelily through the big, bare studio. It would have touched most men, but it seemed to affect Quayne as little as a wave of water beating up against a granite rock. His face, set in harsh lines of determination, altered no whit.

"Soon? Do you call three years—soon?" he asked indifferently.

"It's a short time for love to die in," she replied. "But it's a long time to wait—and wait. Straton, do you realise that we've never even spoken to each other for three years—never since that night on the terrace at Quayling?"

"I meant it to be like that," he said.

"Oh, I know," she answered bitterly. "We've passed each other in the same street—often been in the same room together at other people's houses, and yet you've managed to avoid speaking to me. It—it was cruel of you, Straton."

"Possibly." His tone was still quite neutral. "But always remember that yours was the initial cruelty."

She threw out her arms.

"Do you think I ever forget it—forget that it was through my own fault I lost you? . . . That doesn't make it any easier to bear." She drew a step

nearer to him. "Can't you forgive me—ever?" She looked up at him imploringly, her eyes dark with pain.

"It isn't a case of forgiveness between us. All that I felt for you, you killed, and nothing could ever bring it to life again."

"Don't say that—don't say that!" she broke in passionately. "Oh, Straton, I've learned my lesson. Won't you give me a chance?"

"I can't. Don't you see, the you I loved wasn't the real you—it was the woman I imagined you to be. And when I found that the woman I worshipped didn't exist —that ended it."

"And my love—counts for nothing?" She spoke in a small, tired voice. She was beginning to realise the iron resolution of the man. Throughout the whole three years which had passed since he had left her alone on the terrace at Quayling she had hoped—hoped that some day the love he had had for her would override everything else and bring him back to her. But that day had never come. With a quiet, relentless decision, he had avoided any meeting with her. Never once had they been alone—until now. And now, even the closeness of her—that proximity which so often wakes to vibrant, demanding life a love that has been crushed down and denied, which makes even an old dead love stir painfully in its shroud—had failed to move him one jot.

"And my love—counts for nothing?" said the small, tired voice.

"For nothing. I went through hell for you once. A man doesn't go through hell twice for the same woman."

"Oh, you men are lucky!" she burst out passionately. "You go through hell and come out on the other side, but a woman's hell lasts the whole of her life."

A silence fell between them. At last Quayne broke it.

"There is nothing to be gained by all this," he said coldly. "I came to see Miss Wedderburn, and since she's not here——"

"But she is here."

Quayne glanced round the room as though for an instant he thought Jill must have entered the room unobserved. Then his eyes sought Iris's.

"Where is she?" he demanded quickly.

Iris made no answer. In the swift change in his face, in the sudden fire that lit itself in his eyes she had read his secret. It was like a fresh stab in an old wound, and for a moment she was literally unable to speak. Her face whitened slowly and she swayed where she stood.

"Where is she?" he repeated.

"I'll tell you—I'll tell you," she answered hurriedly. "But promise me one thing first—just one thing, Straton——"

She laid a detaining hand on his shoulder, a hand that shook pitifully. The contrast between the exquisite, gleaming frock she wore—symbol of the gay and pleasant things of life—and the white, strained face above it struck him almost violently. A faint compassion stirred within him.

"Well?" he said. "What is it?"

She caught her breath, forcing back the sob that was climbing to her throat.

"Promise me that in future when we meet you'll speak to me, sometimes—just a few words, as you would to any other woman. I can't bear it if you won't—do that! Don't thrust me right out of your life. Let me stay in it as a friend—an acquaintance, if you like." She corrected herself hastily.

For a moment he hesitated. Something seemed fugitively to warn him that it was better to leave things as they were—better to let that barrier of non-recognition remain between them. But the momentary compassion her pale, anguished beauty had stirred in him still governed his impulses—what harm could it do if he yielded to her appeal? It was not much to ask, surely—just to be treated as a casual acquaintance.

"Straton——" Her soft, dragging voice came again imploringly.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"As you will," he said. "Let it be like that, if it pleases you."

With a sudden, impulsive movement she snatched at his hand and kissed it. He wrenched it roughly away.

"Don't do that," he said harshly. He was impatient to see Jill. This other woman didn't count. As though she realised it, she turned away and picked up her coat.

"I'm going," she said unsteadily. "You can explain to Miss Wedderburn why I've gone—tell her any lie you like."

A moment later the door of the flat closed with a bang and Quayne found himself alone in the studio.

CHAPTER XIV

SURRENDER

JILL, sitting alone in the little kitchen, heard the door of the flat close, and, lifting her head, listened curiously to the utter silence which followed. They had gone, then—Straton and Iris together. But the snatches of their conversation which had come to her ears before they left had revealed to her Quayne's secret. She knew now why he was such a hard, embittered man; she could comprehend—only too clearly—his strange reticences. He had loved Iris. Some misunderstanding had occurred between them, keeping them apart, and now, to-day, in her own flat, the years had been bridged and they had come together again.

She could not be mistaken—those first broken phrases, quick with emotion, with which they had greeted each other, followed by Iris's "Have you forgotten—so soon?" And then, later, Straton's "the woman I worship . . ." She had pushed the kitchen door to, not daring actually to shut it, and had closed her ears with her fingers in order that she might not overhear. But you cannot keep your fingers to your ears for an indefinite period without strain, and now and again, during a moment's relaxation, half-caught phrases such as the above had scored themselves deep into her mind.

All at once she felt that she hated Iris—hated the beauty of her which she had loved, hated the fact that

she should be talking to Quayne under her roof. And as the door of the flat closed behind them, the inner meaning of that hatred which had leaped into such fierce and unexpected life revealed itself—showed her her own heart. Straton was no longer just a friend, a man who interested her. He was the man she loved—and the man who, loving another woman, had yet asked her to marry him. With that bitter, lightning revelation, it seemed to her as though she sank suddenly down into some dreadful sea where huge waves buffeted her—horrible, conflicting waves that battled with each other, tossing her hurt, bruised body—or was it her soul?—hither and thither, striking it with all the fury of opposing forces.

It seemed a long time before she came to the surface again, and then she found herself still in the little kitchen, and the grandfather's clock, which had begun to strike as the sea surged over her, sounded one more bell-like note. What had appeared to her an interminable period of agony had passed during the momentary time it had taken for the clock to strike five.

She rose to her feet and moved unsteadily towards the studio. She wondered what the room would look like? It couldn't look just the same now that her heart had been broken—quite carelessly broken and thrown aside—betwixt its four walls.

She pushed open the door which Iris, in her hasty flight, had only half closed behind her. Then, with a caught-back exclamation she checked abruptly on the threshold and stared stonily at a figure on the other side of the room, outlined against the rosy firelight.

Quayne had not gone! He was standing by the chimneypiece, arms folded, gazing down into the fire, his

eyes looking even more deeply set than usual beneath savagely drawn brows. He turned instantly at the sound of her entrance, his face clearing.

"At last!" he exclaimed. "Jill—I've come back. I've tried to keep away—and I couldn't."

Jill came farther into the room. Her face was rather white in its frame of short dark hair, and her eyes held a curious hard brilliance.

"Why have you come?" she asked.

He strode across to her side.

"I've come," he said simply, "because I can't face life any longer without you. I want you——"

"So much that you could keep away for three months because of what happened on the Moor." She was surprised at the steadiness of her own voice. It was perfectly clear and composed, with a little thread of hardness running through it like a fine steel wire.

"I'm not thinking any longer about what happened on the Moor—though I'll take good care it never happens again"—rather grimly. "I'm not thinking about anything or anybody in the world except you. Jill"—and suddenly his arms went round her—"Jill beloved, I know you better than you know yourself. You're keeping love—keeping me—at bay by sheer force of will. You don't want to—you're giving both of us needless pain——"

With a swift movement she wrenched herself out of his arms and stood away from him.

"Why do you talk like this?" she demanded in a low voice that pulsated with anger. "Why all this pretence? . . . Oh, Straton, I wouldn't have believed it of you!"

"Pretence? I don't think I understand you," he said,

speaking with a kind of forced repression. "What do you mean by pretence?"

"I mean the pretence that you came here to tell me all this. If you did, you'd no right to. There's Iris—have you forgotten Iris?"

"Iris?"

"Yes. . . . You see, I heard." She went on rapidly, with a kind of ingenuous embarrassment that made her seem very young and rather appealing. "I didn't want to hear. As soon as I knew—guessed what was happening, I kept my fingers in my ears. But I couldn't help hearing something—a few words here and there."

Quayne looked down at her curiously. The ghost of a smile seemed to hover round the corners of his lips.

"And what you heard led you to think I—cared for Iris?"

Jill nodded.

"Oh, it wasn't only what you said. It was your voices. But"—the colour deepened in her face and for a moment she turned a little aside from him—"I heard Iris ask if you had forgotten. And—and I don't think anyone could forget who had once loved Iris. She is so beautiful. . . . And you know you did call her the 'woman I worship'."

"Did I? So you think I've come straight from making love to Iris to ask you to marry me?" There was a dangerous note in his voice. It reminded one of the menace of storm which the distant sound of thunder holds.

"Answer me," he repeated, as she remained silent. "Was that what you thought?"

His eyes, like grey fires, seemed to burn their way right

into the secret places of her soul, and all at once the enormity of what she had thought became clear to her—the insult of it to any man who possessed a spark of decency. A slow flush stained her face scarlet from chin to brow, and she bent her head.

"Well," he said. "Are you afraid to say so?—You were evidently not afraid to think it!"

The taunt flicked her like a lash. She threw back her small dark head with a sudden boyish gesture and faced him again.

"No," she said. "I'm not afraid. It's true—I did think it. Even now I don't in the least understand. But I'm horribly ashamed I thought—that."

A flash of admiration gleamed for a moment in the grey eyes that were watching her. There was something so steady and honest about her frank acknowledgment.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "And now, will you listen while I tell you the whole story?"

"Are you sure that you want to tell it me?" she interjected.

"Quite sure." He pulled a chair up to the fire for her, but he himself remained standing, his elbow on the chimneypiece, looking down at her as she sat, hands clasped round her knee, listening to what he had to say.

"I can see now why you haven't understood. You caught only words, half-phrases, and misinterpreted them. Iris is no longer the woman I worship. I used the past tense when I said that. It's more than three years ago since my worship of Iris crumbled to atoms."

"Then—you—did—love her once?" said Jill slowly.

"Yes. I loved her once. And I asked her to be my wife. She gave me her promise, and when I went out from her presence that day I think I must have looked

as Moses did when he came back from communing with God—my face transfigured." He gave a short, jarring laugh. "Anyway, I've no doubt the people I met in the street could read my fatuous happiness. I seem to remember occasional sympathetic smiles from one or two who passed me, and I recollect thinking how jolly it was of them to understand and that the world was really rather a splendid place to be in. . . . You see, Iris was very beautiful, and I thought her soul as beautiful as her body. That was where I made my mistake. She had about as much soul as a cat. . . . But I left her that day, feeling as if I had been treading on holy ground, feeling humbled to the earth and exalted to the heavens—overwhelmed at the wonderful thing which had happened to me. Men aren't overburdened with humility, as a rule, I know," he added grimly. "But there is just one moment in his life when every man who *is* a man feels utterly and entirely humble, and that is when he realises that the woman he loves, loves him." He paused, then went on harshly: "That was my moment. It was a very brief one. Before I reached home, after leaving Iris, I met my best pal in the street and began pouring out my glorious news to him—to learn that at that very time he and she were engaged to be married."

"Ah!——" A pitiful exclamation broke from Jill's lips. She could visualise it all so clearly, sense that head-on crash between the man's blind confidence and belief in the woman he loved and the stunning, incredible fact of her duplicity. So much in him which hitherto she had found difficult to interpret was now explained —the hard side he turned toward the world, the essential cynicism of his outlook, above all, that odd, bitter

antagonism towards women which revealed itself in his books.

There seemed no words in which to express the rush of compassion that she felt, but her hands went out towards him waveringly, in a hesitant gesture of sympathy. He took them and held them closely in both his.

"Do you understand now?" he went on. "All that I felt for Iris is gone—dead three years ago. I hated women pretty badly for a time. And then you came. . . . When I found how Iris had deceived me, I swore I would allow no other woman to enter into my life and play havoc with it, and by the time we met, you and I, my determination had hardened into iron. . . . Do you remember that day you came to me out of the fog? I think I knew then that you were a woman I could love—if I let myself. I knew I cared when I found I'd allowed you to slip away without first finding out your name and where you lived. Afterwards, I came to think it was the intervention of providence, because I felt instinctively that you had everything which Iris had not—all I had once hoped to find in the woman I should love—pluck and determination and absolute candour. And I didn't want to be hurt again by any woman. So I tried to be glad when I lost you." He paused, but Jill did not speak, only let her hands still rest quietly in his. "Nearly three years later, you came into my life again, and I knew then that it was useless to fight against my love for you. Once, I lost faith in you—that time on Dartmoor when I believed you had lied to me. But I knew afterwards that you couldn't lie—that it was, and must be, only your work that was keeping us apart."

"Yes. It was nothing to do with Garry," assented Jill.

"No," he said. "I know. And your work isn't going to keep us apart any longer. When will you marry me, Jill?"

The question was so sudden, so unexpected that she could find no answer. Only, instinctively, she tried to draw away from him. But he refused to let her go. His grip on her hands strengthened.

"No," he said, his voice roughening a little. "I'm not going to let you go this time. You said once that you didn't care enough to marry me, and I told you that you weren't being honest with yourself. I didn't believe you were. This time I'm going to *know*. I've come back because I want you as a man only ever wants one woman in the world, but if you send me away now, I shan't come back again. I shall accept your answer. No woman—not even a woman I love as I love you"—sternly—"is going to play with me. If you love me, be honest with your own heart and say so. And if you don't, for God's sake be honest and say you don't, and I'll go away. But don't put it on to your work. Jill——" All at once his voice softened incredibly and he drew her closer to him, his eyes searching her face. "Jill, am I to go—or stay?"

And Jill, who in those tortured moments in the little kitchen had learned all that lay hidden in her own heart, turned towards him and answered very low:

"Stay."

The next moment she felt herself swept up into his arms, crushed against his breast, while he rained kisses on her lips and eyes and throat—fierce, imperious kisses that stormed down her defences till she lay spent and shaken in his arms—almost frightened by the passion her surrender had evoked.

"Straton——" She spoke breathlessly, under her voice, struggling a little against him.

He folded her more closely in his arms, but this time, as though he understood, there was less of passion, more of tenderness in his embrace.

"My beloved!" It was as if with those two short words he took her into his life and heart, never to let her go again, and suddenly all fear of him left her. She lifted her face to his, her eyes shining with a still, soft radiance.

"And mine," she said.

CHAPTER XV

DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW

TWILIGHT had deepened in the studio. Only the changeful firelight pierced the dusk, bringing quivering shadows to life and thrusting them back into the dark again as a fugitive puff of wind blew down the chimney and drove the flames this way or that. Presently the fire burned steadily again and a queer, grotesque shadow, flung by the tall easel, crept to the foot of Jill's chair, where she sat dreaming to herself of the wonderful thing which had happened.

She and Straton belonged to each other now! It was only a few minutes since he had left her and still, in some curious way, she seemed to feel his presence with her. Now that all misunderstandings had been cleared away and she had realised the fact that just as he loved her, so she herself loved him, there was no longer—never could be again—any feeling of actual loneliness. They belonged. Belonged to each other in a way which no absence, short or long, could ever influence. Always she would feel conscious of his love, enfolded by it, whether he were close beside her, so that the beloved voice and touch stirred every pulse in her body to throbbing, racing life, or whether they were apart and the memory of those moments must needs suffice until their next meeting.

To Jill, who had known to the full what it means to be lonely, who had lived so unsheltered a life, fighting

all her own battles and with no one to whom she could turn in any difficulty, the thought that now she really "belonged" to someone held a peculiar sweetness.

Her only actual belongings in this world had been her weak, charming, irresponsible father, her love for whom, even as a tiny child, had partaken largely of the protective feeling. But with Quayne it was the very reverse. Intuitively she realised the indomitable force of the man —recognised half unconsciously that, for all her plucky independence of spirit, he was the stronger. She did not actually admit it to herself in so many words, yet with this instinctive recognition of his strength came a new thought. Supposing they should ever quarrel again, who would win? A faint smile tilted the corners of her mouth. She could not really imagine quarrelling with Straton—now. People who cared for one another as they did would be able to settle any divergence of opinion without quarrelling about it.

People who loved each other as they did! Once more the wonder of it rushed over her, and, looking back on her earlier determination never, never to let love and marriage have any share in her existence, she felt inclined to laugh at herself. Love was the most wonderful thing in the world, and there was no reason to shut it out of your life because there happened to be work in which you were interested. There was plenty of room for both work and love; she felt illimitably thankful that Straton had taught her this before it was too late. And she loved the imperious way in which he had done it. He had just stepped over all the puerile barriers she had erected between them exactly as though they didn't exist: "Your work isn't going to stand between us any longer." No, it would never stand between them

again. Nothing would ever stand between them again. . . .

The door of the studio opened and a ray of light from the little hall beyond split the gathering darkness. Followed the click of the electric switch and, as the burners leapt into life, old Madelon came paddling into the room on her flat-heeled boots.

"Mademoiselle Gille, Mademoiselle Gille, but what are you doing all alone in the dark?" There was an anxious note of remonstrance in the old woman's voice. It was very unlike her mistress to sit brooding alone in an unlit studio, and the discovery filled her with alarm.

"Is mademoiselle not well?" she went on, scrutinising Jill's face with concern.

Jill looked up, smiling.

"Awfully well, Madelon. I don't think I ever felt so well in my life before. I was just—dreaming. That's all."

Madelon's brown-currant eyes suddenly gleamed sagaciously.

"And of what was mademoiselle dreaming, if one may ask?"

"One may," replied Jill gravely. Then, jumping up from her chair, she laid her hands on the old Frenchwoman's shoulders and laughed down at her. "Madelon, do you remember the tales you used to tell me in that horrid little back bedroom at Pension Hugo? It was just after mother died, when poor daddy was so miserable that he used to go out every night and never come back until nearly morning. All the stories about fairies and witches? And princesses who were under a spell until some Prince Charming blew in and in an easy, lordly

sort of way put everything straight—and—married the princess? *Do* you remember, Madelon?"

"Very surely, I remember! And so mademoiselle's prince has come? Ah, did I not know it!"

"You knew it?"

"*Bien sûr,* I knew it! It was not for nothing that mademoiselle was so changed—so altered. Old Madelon has been only waiting until mademoiselle should deign to tell her."

Jill flung her arms round the old Frenchwoman's neck and kissed her withered-apple cheeks.

"Madelon! You wicked old humbug! But I couldn't have told you before, because it didn't happen till to-day."

"You have met him only to-day, *chérie?*"

"No, no, *no!* But the spell was only broken to-day—you see, the princess in this story was under the spell of all sorts of wrong ideas—they'd grown up round her like a thick hedge. And when the prince came along—he is tall, Madelon—he just strode right over them."

Madelon nodded approvingly.

"*Il est d'une sagesse, votre prince.* And is he handsome, mademoiselle?"

Jill paused a moment, then shook her head.

"No, I don't think you'd call him handsome, Madelon. He's tall—I told you that—and has a lean, brown face. You'd think it must have been baked in the sun. And round his eyes—they're rather wonderful eyes, Madelon, very grey and straight-looking, and they make you jump a little—inside, you know—when he looks at you suddenly. And round them he's got quite a lot of wrinkles—nice ones, I mean, so that you can guess what he'll look like when he laughs. His mouth is a bit grim, but it kinks up at the corners, so I'm not at all frightened

of him! And he's been very unhappy once—but isn't going to be any more."

"I should think not, indeed—if my little mademoiselle loves him! . . . And mademoiselle herself—is she happy?"

Jill's eyes shone softly.

"Oh—*so* happy, Madelon!"

The old Frenchwoman's arms went round her and she drew the girl's head down on to her capacious bosom, stroking the cropped dark hair with loving, gnarled old hands.

"Then all is well, *chérie.* If you are happy, that is all that matters. Old Madelon will go back to Paris without grumbling."

Jill lifted her head quickly.

"Go back to Paris? But why should you do that?"

"Why? *Bien sûr,* when mademoiselle is married and has an establishment of her own, she will have no further need of an old *bonne-à-tout-faire.* It will be finished."

Madelon spoke bravely, but her voice trembled a little. "Mademoiselle Gille" had been almost like her own child to her in those long-ago days at Pension Hugo, and her heart had been torn when the inevitable parting came. Time had healed the wound, more or less, and then had followed the great and unexpected joy of being reunited to her "petite mademoiselle" and of serving her once more. She would have been content to serve and care for Jill to the end of her days and have asked no more of life. And now, fate, in the shape of a husband for her adored young mistress, had intervened and Madelon would have to uproot herself anew and fare forth again into a world which held no one in particular for her to love and tend.

"It will be finished," she said, with the stoical acceptance of facts which is common enough amongst Frenchwomen of her age and class.

"Finished? What will be finished?" exclaimed Jill. "*Of course* you won't go back to France! I'm not going to give up the studio—I shall want it just the same. And I shall want you here to look after it—and after me, too, you silly old thing."

"Mademoiselle will not give up the studio?" murmured Madelon, bewildered, scarcely crediting the good news.

"Of course I shan't. I shall go on painting, and I shall want you just as much as ever."

Still Madelon hesitated, incredulous.

"And the husband—the English husband of mademoiselle—he will permit that she still works after she is married?" she persisted doubtfully.

Jill laughed and patted her cheerily on the shoulder.

"Why, of course he will," she said.

Madelon seized her hand and kissed it passionately. The tears were running down her wrinkled old face—tears of pure joy and relief. It was very extraordinary to her that a husband should allow his wife to go on earning her living by painting pictures—it was such hard work and would occupy so much of madame's time. But perhaps English husbands were like that. In any case, if it was so, peculiar though it might be, it would make the whole difference in life to her, and she retired to the kitchen full of gratitude to *le bon dieu* for sparing her any parting from her beloved "Mademoiselle Gille."

The days that followed were all too wonderful to Jill. Her portrait of Iris Lethbridge was completed, and although there were several other commissions which she

had undertaken, none of the sittings was due to commence for several weeks yet, so that for the present she was free to enjoy her new-found happiness to the full. And as Quayne proved a very demanding lover it was just as well that her time was at her own disposal. He took her here, there, and everywhere, and since, in spite of, or, perhaps, because of his aloofness, Quayne was a much sought-after guest among Mayfair hostesses, the announcement of his engagement was the signal for a rain of invitations asking him to bring his fiancée with him in order that they might make acquaintance with her. So Jill danced until she wondered how she came to have any feet left, dined at famous restaurants of which she had hitherto only vaguely known the names, and tore over the country in Straton's big grey car, and as she did all these things in his company, she learned to the full the meaning of the word "together." And "together," when a man and woman are in love, is the most wonderful word in the English language.

It added to her happiness, if anything could have added to it at this particular juncture, that the Brabazons, and Hazel and her mother, and Brett Forrester were all frankly and unreservedly delighted at her engagement. With the exception of Mrs. Kenyon, they were all assembled for dinner at the Brabazons' house in Audley Square when Jill rather shyly confided the news.

"It's perfectly charming, my dear," declared Lady Susan, when the first ferment of congratulations and good wishes had died down. "And I shall always feel thoroughly vainglorious that I had a good hand in bringing you two together. Now let's go in to dinner."

Everybody laughed, and Brett chided her for being a graceless, matchmaking old woman, and not one of them

could see into that future when Lady Susan's gay pride and delight in having helped, as she declared, to bring about the engagement would be turned into grief and bitterness.

The only shadow that fell across Jill's complete and utter happiness was Garry's reception of the news. She had broken it to him quietly one day when they were alone together in the studio. For a few minutes he seemed almost stunned. Then:

"Is this true, Jill?" he said. "You're not having me on—just trying to see what I'll stand?"

She shook her head.

"No," she answered gently. "You know I wouldn't do that Garry. But, please, please take it sensibly——"

"Sensibly? Good Lord, Jill, if you're in love—if you know yourself what love is, now—you wouldn't ask me to take it 'sensibly'!"

His dark young face was very pale and drawn-looking, and there was a feverish brilliance in his eyes that Jill didn't like. They were curiously hard and glittering.

"Look here, Garry," she said, speaking very gently, "perhaps 'sensibly' was wrong—stupid of me. But, anyway, you mustn't take it like this. Don't forget you're my pal—you've always been that. And—and because I couldn't give you what you asked, I don't want to lose my friend. Must I—need I?" she added pleadingly.

Unconsciously she had struck the right chord—at any rate, for the moment. There had been so much of good comradeship between them in the past that this link held even against the clash and strain of other things. How long it would hold was another matter, however.

"No," said Garry. "You don't stand to lose anything, Jill. I'm the loser. If my—friendship—means something to you, however little, it's yours, of course. You

know that. I suppose you can't help caring for Quayne any more than I can help caring damnably for you. . . . And there's no doubt that you've chosen the better man," he went on cynically. "I'm not a rich and famous author, although I've enough to rub along on. I'm a slacker, and I suppose I've rotted most of my chances away. . . . Perhaps, with something to work for, I might have done differently. Probably not, though. Anyhow, the gods seem to have settled everything very nicely all round, dealing out rewards and punishments to the virtuous and guilty in the best approved manner. So—here's luck."

He held out his hand, and Jill slipped hers into it. There was too much bravado about his speech. It troubled her a little.

"I wish—I wish you wouldn't speak so bitterly," she said sorrowfully.

" 'So bitterly'!" He gave a short, harsh laugh. The momentary responsiveness induced by her appeal to the comradeship between them vanished suddenly. "I tell you, Jill, you can thank providence or whoever it is that runs this rotten old world, on your knees if I stop at 'speaking bitterly.' Frankly, I don't think it very likely that I shall."

An odd foreboding gripped her.

"What do you mean, Garry?" she asked, under her breath.

"What do I mean?"—recklessly. "Perhaps I don't mean anything at all—but if I do, you'll know what it is all right when the time comes."

And with that he left her, swaggering out of the studio with a leisurely arrogance that betokened Garry at his worst and most dangerous.

CHAPTER XVI

THE PRICE

"I STILL think you were rather hard on her."

Jill and Straton were sitting together in the studio. Somehow or other Iris's name had cropped up in the conversation—there had been a portrait of her in one of the illustrated magazines—and from that had followed on a discussion in which Jill voiced the opinion that Quayne had been very severe in his judgment of her.

"Then you think nothing of a woman's promising to marry one man when she is already engaged to another?" demanded Straton.

"Well, you see"—Jill temporised—"you might *think* that you were tremendously in love with the one man, and then you might meet another whom you found you could be ever so much more in love with. I should think that's quite possible."

"Should you indeed?" Quayne made a long arm and, pulling her down on to his knee, regarded her with quizzical eyes. "I trust you're not proposing to give me a practical demonstration of your theory?"

"Me?" replied Jill ungrammatically, the swift colour running up under her clear skin. "No, of course I'm not. You see"—rather sweetly and humorously—"you happen to be the one I'm 'ever so much more in love with.'"

"Then there *was* someone else—someone before me?" he said swiftly. The clasp of his arms round her tight-

ened. Then, as she made no reply: "Answer me, Jill."

"Only—only Garry," she faltered, startled by the sudden blaze in his eyes. "I did—I *do* care for Garry. You know that."

"Still? Isn't one lover enough for you, then—any more than it was for Iris?"

She hesitated a moment. This was not the first nor even the second time that Straton had evinced flashes of almost savage jealousy. Indeed, she had begun to realise that it was an integral part of his make-up, this fierce, almost primitive desire for the complete possession of the woman he loved. Beneath that cool, rather cynical manner of his lay hidden a certain arbitrariness, a dominant virility which sometimes thrilled her, appealing to all that was primitive woman within her, sometimes roused in her a feeling of rebellion. On this occasion, recognising the source whence sprang his question—the old distrust of women which Iris had implanted in him—she answered him quite simply and frankly.

"I don't care for Garry—in that way, though I nearly did—once."

"I'm glad it was only 'nearly,' " interpolated Quayne dryly.

"Yes—nearly." She leaned back against the circle of his arm and regarded him steadily. "But I shall always care for him as a pal, and it would be mean of me to forget him simply because"—with a little smile—"I'm particularly happy just now."

"And you're sure, quite sure, that you prefer me to Garry Lester? It's better"—grimly—"to have these little matters clear before marriage rather than after."

"I'm quite sure," said Jill, and something in the frank blue eyes that met his keen glance so unflinchingly seemed

to answer the question even more completely than the spoken words. He drew her back against his breast, and for the next half-hour their conversation had very little interest for the world at large.

"I think," said Jill, at last, raising her head from his shoulder with a smile, "that I'm rather glad, after all, that you *were* so severe on Iris all those years ago—although I'm sorry for her, of course," she added hastily.

"I'm afraid I'm not in the least sorry for her," replied Quayne. "As you sow, so you reap."

Jill shook her head at him.

"Well, I only hope *we* shall never have a very bad quarrel, as I'm afraid you'd prove horribly unforgiving if we did."

"Not to you—unless you deceived me over anything. And even then, with you——"

"I don't see why you should be more forgiving to me than you were to her. You were in love with her at the time, remember."

"Not with her—with what I thought she was. Besides, there's one great difference between you and Iris."

"What's that?" asked Jill with interest, adding with a flicker of mirth: "Except that I'm penny plain and she's twopence coloured."

"It's something that goes rather deeper than mere beauty. You—give; Iris only takes."

"No, no; she loved you," broke in Jill quickly. "I knew that—when I heard her speak to you."

"Possibly," returned Quayne cynically. "But there is always room for doubt when a woman throws over a poor man for a rich one."

"Well, thank goodness, that's one of the things that will never worry us, even if we do quarrel. Because, if

I go on as I am doing, I shall be quite a wealthy person soon! I have a lot of commissions to do now, at heavenly prices—why *are* people willing to pay so much to see themselves on canvas, even when they're ugly, I wonder? Anyhow, it's a good thing for me they are. By the way, we'd better make the most of our opportunities, Straton mine, because I'm beginning the first portrait next week, and after that I shan't have time to play about with you as I have been doing."

"No," assented Quayne gloomily. "I shall be glad when you've finished all these confounded commissions you've undertaken, because I want to marry you as quickly as possible, sweetheart."

"Do you?" Jill smiled happily. She made no foolish protestations or suggestions of postponement. She and Quayne loved each other. It was quite right and natural that they should get married soon. She was perfectly simple and fearless in her acceptance of love and all it signifies.

"Yes, I do," said Quayne, holding her more closely. "How soon do you think you could be ready?"

Jill reflected, then turned to him with a half-tremulous, half-indulgent smile.

"I could leave two or three of the portraits until after we were married, perhaps. I think my sisters would—understand, and not mind postponing them until a little later."

But Quayne shook his head.

"No," he said decidedly. "Finish them all off before we're married. I'd rather wait and start our lives together quite clear of anything else. I shall want you all to myself when you really belong to me."

Jill turned a little in his arms and looked at him with puzzled eyes.

"But—but I'm not going to stop painting when I'm married," she said.

"Of course not. Only you won't need to paint professionally any longer. You'll just paint for your own amusement—when the spirit moves you."

"'Amusement'!" she repeated. "Straton, I don't understand. You—you're not imagining I'm going to *give up* painting after we're married?"

"No, I've told you that. You might even keep on this studio, if you liked, and come down and play about here sometimes."

"'Play about'?" Jill began to feel that there was something idiotically parrot-like about the way she was repeating his words each time he spoke. She pulled herself together. A sudden great fear had knocked at her heart.

"Straton," she said quietly, "I think we're—we're talking at cross-purposes. Painting isn't a sort of hobby or amusement with me. It's the big thing in my life—just as writing books is the big thing in yours. Why do you speak as though, after we're married, I can just put it on one side?"

"You can. Darlingest, you don't suppose I want my wife to be slaving away painting the portraits of dud people who ought never to appear on canvas? I don't want you to work at all——"

"But it isn't slavery!" broke in Jill. "Good heavens, Straton, surely, you, of all people, understand what one's work means to one?"

"There'll be no need for you to work when you're my wife," replied Quayne.

"No need? . . . But it isn't a case of 'need,' dear.

I *want* to work. I love my work, and I love the independence that it brings. I—I should be wretched without it."

"There's another side to the question which you haven't thought of, sweetheart. Haven't you realised that I want a wife—a comrade, not a busy person in an overall who lives all day at her studio and only comes home in the evening? I want *you,* belovedest—to feel you're there, in my house—not somewhere else, working hard when there's no need for it." He smiled slightly. "You needn't worry about money, you know. Thanks to a miserly old uncle, now defunct, and to the fact that a misguided public likes my books enormously, we've got rather more money than is good for us."

"I'm not worrying about money," said Jill. "It isn't that. It's——"

"Ambition?" suggested Quayne.

She hesitated a moment.

"Yes. In a way, I suppose it is," she said at last. "I want to do big work—original, not only portraits, I mean. Something better than 'The Uncounted Third.'"

"And you put your ambition before me?" he asked quietly.

The great fear which had been knocking at Jill's heart suddenly took on shape and form. She slid from her place on Quayne's knee and stood a little away from him, looking at him with wide, questioning eyes.

"Straton, are you asking me to give up—my work—when I marry you?"

He, too, rose to his feet and, coming close to her, laid his hands on her shoulders and met her glance with one that was equally questioning.

"Is it too much to ask, Jill, dear?" he said. He spoke

very quietly, but she could hear in the low, deep tones something that touched her sharply—an appeal so strong that it was almost terrible in its demand. It was like an actual claim on her—the claim of a long loneliness, silently endured, which she, and only she, could ever succour.

"Do you mean—do you want——" She faltered into silence, almost stunned by the realisation.

"I want—you," he said. "All of you, sweet. I don't want to share you with your art. Its claims are too big—they're bound to be. Don't you see it, belovedest? You've got so much of genius, that if you continue painting seriously the man who loves you must go to the wall. You'd give yourself—as you do now—utterly to your work, more and more as time went on. You couldn't help it. It would absorb you. And I want you to give yourself—to me. . . ."

Jill's hands were clasped tightly together. She was trying to face, to understand, the terrible choice which had come so suddenly upon her. Somehow she knew instinctively that if she chose—chose as she would like to choose—her life with Straton would never be quite the same—never all that it might have been. It would always lack the completeness of absolute surrender. He would feel that she had withheld a part of herself—not yielded to him wholly, as his arrogant, imperious type of love demanded. Men were selfish lovers! And yet, in spite of the renunciation he was asking of her, she was conscious of a strange, inexplicable thrill of sweetness, of something which almost savoured of exaltation in the very fact that he wanted her to be so completely his that he could demand this ruthless sacrifice, could be jealous even of the abstract hold which the art she loved might have over her.

"Well?" Quayne's voice broke vibrantly across the struggle of her thoughts. "Am I asking too much?"

"You're asking something—very big," she said slowly.

"Too big, I suppose?"

She could hear the old bitter note in his voice—the hard bitterness and distrust of woman's love which circumstances had ground into him. And in that moment she felt as though no sacrifice, no renunciation of hers, were too great if she could make up to him for all that he had suffered in the past. A passion of tenderness and pity overwhelmed her, of love that longed to give . . . and give . . . and give again. . . .

"No," she said, her eyes glowing softly. "No, it's not —too big."

"You'll do it?"

She nodded voicelessly, her eyes still shining straight into his.

The next moment he had swept her off her feet, into his arms, and she felt his mouth pressed hard on hers. Her lips felt hurt by his kisses, but she loved the hurt, and when at last he set her down she leaned against him trembling, her breath coming in little soft gasps.

"Darling!—darling!" His voice was all shaken and uneven. It seemed to beat against her very heart. "I shall never forget—never! Belovedest, now I know you're mine—unutterably mine!" He took her hands and pressed them against his face. "God, how sweet you are! . . . Jill, little darling Jill! . . ."

And Jill, as she gave herself to him once more, every nerve in her body quivering with an answering passion, felt that nothing in all the world counted against love like this—nothing could ever be too high a price to pay for the ecstasy that only love itself can give.

CHAPTER XVII

LEAVE-TAKING

I WONDER—oh, I do wonder if—if I shall miss it all as badly as I think!"

Unconsciously Jill spoke aloud, though her voice was very low, almost under her breath, and the hand with which she had been stroking Omar's brindled back stayed suddenly still as the thought drove itself to her lips. Omar, being her only audience, merely gave her his usual answer of a speculative stare. Somehow it irritated her, that sphinx-like gaze of the big cat's topaz eyes—it always looked as though he could impart so much of wisdom if he chose, but that he just didn't choose—and she sprang to her feet with such suddenness that he toppled scramblingly to the ground in an undignified flurry of extended claws and ruffled fur, and marched off offendedly to the other side of the room, whence he gazed at Jill with the utmost astonishment. She had never treated him in so cavalier a fashion before, and with all his wisdom he had no understanding of the taut-strung nerves which were responsible for that unexpected movement of hers.

To-morrow she was to be married. This was the last evening of her life as Jill Wedderburn, and circumstances latterly had combined to key her up to an unwontedly high pitch. To begin with, she had been working very hard for several months in order to complete before her

marriage all the commissions she had undertaken, and this in itself had been somewhat of a strain. In addition, there had been the usual rush of trousseau-buying, letter-writing, packing and unpacking of presents, which makes the weeks preceding a wedding seem like a never-ending attempt to catch up with the innumerable small matters that demand attention.

But it was all over now, and Jill had elected to spend her final evening at the flat with only old Madelon and Omar for company. The wedding itself was to take place from the tall, grey house in Audley Square—Lady Susan would hear of nothing else. Thus no rearrangement of the studio was required, and Jill had felt an instinctive longing to pass the last evening in the old, familiar surroundings where she had worked and played, and found both tears and laughter.

And alone. She had been alone so much during her life—a little, independent, self-steered skiff battling its way bravely through a fairly rough sea—that now, on the eve of the big change impending she felt she would rather meet this, too, alone—be just herself—making the new start, as she had done everything else during her short term of existence, off her own bat, so to speak.

She had been compelled to fight several secret battles with herself during the months of her engagement. The exaltation that had upheld her when she agreed to make the sacrifice Straton asked of her had died down, as the vital ardour which carries one through the big moments of life inevitably does die down. One cannot live continuously at concert pitch, and when reaction comes the bare, hard facts that remain have to be faced. And Jill had faced them. She had no illusions on the matter and recognised that she would miss her painting—the thrill

and glamour of it, the splendid striving for success—intolerably. It had been a part of her life—always. And henceforth, to all intents and purposes, it was to be wiped out.

She knew that to go down occasionally to the studio and paint, as Quayne had suggested she might do, would be useless to assuage the longing. Rather would it have the contrary effect. It would be about as much good as for a drug-taker who had foresworn the vice to indulge in an occasional taste of the drug he worshipped. No, if she were to fulfil her promise to Straton—and Jill had never broken a promise in her life—she must cut out her work as an artist altogether. And the miracle of love appeared to make even that seem worth while.

Others had doubted her ability to stick to her decision—Hazel, in particular.

"You won't be able to do it, Jill," she told her. "It may be all very well at first, but as soon as the newness of everything wears off, your fingers will *ache* for the feel of a brush between them."

Jill, attired in a paint-smeared overall and sitting on an upturned box in the studio, had nodded a somewhat ruffled head.

"Yes, I know," she replied. "I'm not going to pretend—even to myself—that it won't be a wrench." Her teeth closed suddenly on the cigarette she was smoking, almost cutting it in half. With a quick, nervous gesture she tossed it away into the fire.

"Then why are you doing it?" demanded Hazel. Her usually soft brown eyes were alight with indignation. She could not forgive Quayne for demanding such a sacrifice and she felt apprehensive of the consequences. It

seemed to her that he didn't realise all he was asking. "Why did you agree to such a thing?"

"Because Straton wants it."

"Well? You needn't give a man everything he wants. It isn't good for him."

An odd, shy look came into Jill's eyes.

"I think you—want to—when you love him," she answered, a half-whimsical, half-tender smile curving her lips.

To Hazel, who was in love herself, the quietly-uttered little speech held its own significance and she left the flat feeling rather more assured about Jill's future happiness.

"I really think it will be all right," she confided to Lady Susan later on, knowing well that the latter, also, had been much exercised in her mind about the matter.

"It may be," Lady Susan had replied. "But big sacrifices demand a very big love."

Her face was very thoughtful as she spoke. Once, and only once, had she discussed the subject with Straton himself, and then she had told him, in her usual downright way, exactly what she thought.

"It won't work, Straton," she had said decidedly. "I know I've no earthly business to offer my criticism, but I'm much too fond of both of you to see you heading straight for trouble without trying to put a spoke in the wheel."

"I don't think we are," he had answered. "The trouble would be if I had Jill's work to contend with all the time. A divided allegiance doesn't make for matrimonial happiness—even you will allow that."

Lady Susan regarded him consideringly. She could

see his point of view even though she might not agree with it.

"It's a bit of a tangle," she allowed. "And I'm worried over it, Straton, I tell you frankly."

"Don't be worried over it. There's no need. Remember the old Tent-maker's advice"—he smiled slightly, that rather charming smile of his which always lightened the gravity of his face so unexpectedly—" 'To-morrow's tangle to the winds resign.' "

But Lady Susan shook her head.

"And after the winds have done their worst with it you'll find it a worse tangle than ever, probably," she had answered crisply. And the conversation ended, honours even.

In spite of everything Jill could not bring herself to part with the studio flat itself. It had meant so much to her. In it, with Madelon watching over her like a wrinkled guardian angel, she had found the only "home" she had ever known, and the idea of its passing into the hands of some stranger hurt something inside her. As it had been the first symbol of her success, so it was the last link with the old, hard-working, artist's life which she had loved, and she could not bear to break it. Finally, therefore, it had been arranged that Hazel and her mother should transfer themselves there from the rather mean street where they had occupied rooms and that Madelon should remain to look after them. It would be a far more comfortable dwelling-place than they could have afforded in the ordinary way of things, and it pleased Jill to think that someone she loved would be happy there. The only stipulation she made was that the studio itself should remain exactly as it was.

"I may want to come and have a look at it now and

then—or give what Brett calls one of my 'parties on the floor.' Just to recall the days of my frivolous youth," she had added with a queer little break in her voice.

To Madelon this new arrangement appeared the next best thing to looking after her young mistress entirely. She would still see her sometimes, and she was already very fond of Hazel, while Mrs. Kenyon, sweet and frail and gentle, and speaking French almost as fluently as Madelon herself, had captured the old Frenchwoman's heart upon first acquaintance.

"And Mademoiselle Gille will come often—quite often?" Madelon had pleaded when the plan was first broken to her by Jill. "I will look after mademoiselle's friends as though they were mademoiselle herself—but it will not be the same."

"Of course I shall come, Madelon," Jill had assured her. "I shall come very often."

And so the days had slipped by until the very last day of all had come round, and Jill and Omar were keeping watch together alone in the firelit studio. Madelon had already been in once urging Jill to go to bed early and get a good night's rest in view of the probable fatigue of the next day. She appeared a second time. Her eyelids were red-rimmed, as though she had been crying.

"Gille *chérie*"—she had forgotten the formality of "mademoiselle" and gone back to the old days in Paris when she used to come in search of a small, delinquent Jill at bedtime. "Gille *chérie, il faut te coucher.* Thou must sleep well in order to look gay and beautiful on thy wedding-day."

"I'll be the first, Madelon, *bien sûr*—but I can't promise you the second! I'm afraid no amount of sleep would accomplish that." Then, catching sight of a tear trick-

ling slowly down Madelon's nose, she went on accusingly: "You wicked old woman—you've been crying! How dare you cry the day before I'm married?"

"I cry but for joy," explained Madelon, hastily wiping the offending tear away. "For joy in the happiness of mademoiselle."

Jill threw her arms round her and kissed her.

"I know all about that, you silly old darling," she said. "But you're not going to lose me, Madelon. Do remember that. I'm coming back here ever so often. So don't cry any more."

Madelon nodded.

"No, mademoiselle," she said obediently. "And now mademoiselle will go to bed, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"I'll go—in five minutes," said Jill. "That's a promise—so now you can go off to bed yourself with a clear conscience." She half drew, half pushed her towards the doorway, and bestowing a final kiss on the grieving, wrinkled old face, closed the door behind her and came slowly back into the middle of the studio.

The fire had burned low, but there was still light enough to see by, and Jill looked forlornly round at all the familiar belongings which littered the room—here a roll of cartridge paper, there an unused canvas propped against the wall, tubes of paint huddled together on a table, her palette lying amongst them just as she had laid it down when last she used it, with beside it her palette-knife gleaming in the firelight. And tall and dark in the semi-dusk, seeming to dominate the whole studio, stood her easel.

She moved aimlessly about the room, touching first one thing and then another, lifting them up and putting them down again with reluctant, lingering hands—hands

that were not quite steady. Last of all, she drew close to the big easel itself, and her fingers crept caressingly up its gaunt framework. All at once she swayed forward and leaned helplessly against the easel, clinging to it. She felt the chill wood against her cheek. Slowly she turned her head till her soft lips touched the hard fibre . . . pressed against it.

"Oh, my dear!" she whispered. "My dear! . . ."

CHAPTER XVIII

WHOM GOD HATH JOINED

THE church was crowded—packed to the utmost limit of its capacity by the wedding-guests and by the general public which had fought and struggled its way inside in order to see one of its favourite authors married to the slip of a girl who had painted "The Uncounted Third"—the most talked-about picture of last year's Academy. Those who had been unsuccessful in gaining an entrance remained grouped outside the doors, waiting to see the bridal party emerge when the service should be over.

Jill, moving slowly up the aisle on Sir Philip's arm, felt as though she were taking part in a dream. Already she could see the tall altar lights stilly burning, the white robes of the clergy and choristers, while from the pews on either hand glimmered a confused blur of faces. She could not distinguish one from another. They all seemed to have run together into an immense indefinite white mask that was inquisitively turned towards her.

This was not the kind of wedding she would have chosen, but Lady Susan had been so enthusiastic and eager to make rather a special occasion of it that she had yielded to plans which she knew had sprung solely from the impulse of a warm and generous heart. She herself would have liked to be married as quietly as possible. Just she and Straton, walking into the little grey

stone church at Doon St. Frances—the little church by the sea where the beat of the waves mingled with the sound of the organ—and coming out man and wife, while only a few chosen friends waited to wish them Godspeed as they set out together on life's great adventure.

Her hand trembled a little upon Sir Philip's arm at the thought of how big an adventure it was, and then—they were nearing the chancel steps by this time—she looked up and saw Straton standing waiting for her. His eyes—the grey, deep-set eyes she loved—met hers with a smile in them. Such a friendly, whimsical, understanding smile. It was as though he had read her thoughts and knew that she was a little frightened and were laughing gently at her for it. After all, they were adventuring together—and they loved each other. Her nervousness left her as suddenly as it had seized her, and, lifting her head, she smiled back at him.

Then the service began, and in a very short space of time—so short that Jill was conscious of a faint clutch at her heart to think that anything so immensely important could be accomplished so quickly—it was over and the final solemn charge delivered: *"Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder."*

Followed the signing of the register in the vestry, with its usual concomitants of kisses and hand-shakings and a certain subdued mirth, then out of the mystic dimness of the church into the bright pale February sunshine, with the bustling everyday noises of the street about them as they drove away.

There was something comfortably reassuring about the ordinariness of things after that—jokes and laughter, toasts and speeches, the customary routine of wedding parties, so thoroughly hackneyed and yet so thoroughly

jolly and friendly and effervescing that, as Jill remarked gaily: "I'm quite enjoying my own wedding, and I certainly never expected to!"

Even Garry—to whom, as she realised, it must all have meant something other and very different—had met the day's test gallantly. No one would have suspected from the charming, nonsensical little speech he made, nor from his behaviour during the whole course of the afternoon, that the occasion of Jill's marriage was of infinitely more moment to him than to any other of the guests. Only Jill knew, and so perfectly did he play his part that, as the afternoon wore on, she began to believe she had overestimated the hurt which her marriage would mean to him, and a little warm glow of happiness and relief crept round her heart in consequence.

Enlightenment came speedily and unexpectedly. She had exchanged her wedding-gown for a travelling-dress, and was going downstairs to the hall below where everyone was awaiting her, when Garry appeared suddenly at her side and laid a detaining hand on her arm. The thought flashed through her mind that he must have been waiting for her in one of the rooms which opened off the landing upon which they were standing, and for an instant her old fear of him rushed over her in full force. Then she caught sight of his face and all fear was lost in an infinite pity for him, so ravaged was it. He looked ashen, and his eyes stared bleakly at her.

"I'm going to say good-bye to you here," he said, and there was a note of desperation in his voice.

Jill put out her hand.

"Yes, Garry, she answered gently, "let us say good-bye here."

Before she knew what he was going to do he had

taken her into his arms and was kissing her with passionate, despairing kisses that seemed as if they would draw the soul out of her body. She struggled against him with all her might.

"Let me go, let me go!" she breathed fiercely. She dared do no more than whisper, lest those below should hear. He released her slowly, muttering:

"Let you go? God—yes. I've got to let you go—now."

"How dare you?" she exclaimed angrily, as she drew sharply away from him. Then, overcome once more by compassion at the sight of his white, strained young face, she went on reproachfully: "Oh, Garry, how could you?"

"How could I?" He laughed hardly. "How could I not?"

He laid his hands on her arms and held her so for a moment, his eyes gazing stormily into hers, the tense grip of his fingers crushing her soft flesh.

"You're being a fool, Jill. You and I were made for each other. . . . I understand you—Quayne doesn't."

Then, dropping his hands to his sides, he stood aside to let her pass, and with those words ringing in her ears Jill went down to meet her husband.

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER I

THE SEED

JILL moved restlessly. The May sunlight, streaming into the room, jarred on her. It was so bright, so cheerful—a trifle chilly as yet, but still golden and gay with spring's promise of coming summer—while she herself was feeling the very reverse. It seemed almost incredible to her, now, that little more than a year ago she had believed herself to be one of the happiest people on earth.

For a brief time this had been literally true. The first two or three months which followed upon her marriage had been months of unalloyed happiness. Her love for Straton and her interest in his work had seemed enough to fill life to the brim. It had all been new and frightfully exciting, this admission into the innermost sanctuary of his thoughts and ideas. He had begun planning a new novel almost as soon as they returned from the three perfect weeks which Italy had given them as a beginning of their married life, and together they had discussed the theme and characters of the book. Later, when the actual writing was in progress, as each chapter was completed he had given it her to read and asked her comments on it, and it had been sheer, bubbling-up joy to her that he should care to know what she thought about it. Once or twice he had even made certain revisions in the script, based upon her criticisms.

But as the months went on, she found that he became more and more engrossed in the book, shut away from her for hours at a stretch in his study, and time began to hang heavily upon her hands. There was little in the management of the flat to occupy her. Brayton and his wife, who had for many years gravitated between Quayling and Gilsborough Mansions in the wake of their master, saw to everything so perfectly that Jill really felt that, regarded from the standpoint of mistress of the house, she was entirely superfluous. Not that the Braytons made her feel in the least an outsider, as some old servants have a knack of doing when their master gets him a wife. They had fallen to Jill's spontaneous charm at once and worshipped her only second to their master. But, nevertheless, their capable presence made her conscious of a sense of futility—of being unneeded.

Even Straton, she reflected, did not seem to need her as much he used to do. In collaboration with Gaynor Melville, an actor friend of his, he had recently dramatised one of his most popular novels, and arrangements for the production of the play were already in progress. These occupied much of his spare time, and latterly, it appeared to Jill that she might almost as well not have a husband at all.

"No one sees less of you than I do," she had told him once, in a fit of irritation.

He had seemed to understand, then, for instead of arguing, he had just taken her into his arms and kissed her in the old, passionate way he had been wont to do when they were only lovers.

"I hate it as badly as you do, darling," he told her. "But what can I do? The play arrangements, coming on top of all my other work, are bound to take up extra time.

However, it's only for a little while. When the rehearsals are over——"

"Will you have to go to them?" she exclaimed in dismay.

A humorous smile crooked up the corner of his mouth.

"The author usually likes to have some say in the matter—if he gets the chance," he suggested.

And Jill, being reasonable, had agreed at the moment. But when the rehearsals actually began, she found that they absorbed the last moment of time which Straton seemed able to give her. To make up for the hours spent at the theatre he worked at his novel far into the night, so that there were no longer even their evenings together to look forward to, and the lonely evenings following upon empty days had reduced Jill to a state of depression which was well-nigh unendurable.

Of course there were still occasions when it seemed as though she and Straton had slipped back into the early days of their married life—glorious, pulsating moments when work and ambition were temporarily swept aside and their love for each other seemed once again the only thing that counted. But afterwards Quayne's renewed preoccupation in his work and Jill's resultant loneliness weighed upon her more heavily than ever by sheer force of contrast.

Moreover, circumstances had combined to accentuate her loneliness. When she and Straton came back from their honeymoon it was to find that Garry Lester had gone abroad. It was Hazel who had given her the news, together with a letter he had left in her care to be delivered to Jill on her return from Italy. The letter, in Garry's sprawling, artistic, impetuous handwriting, explained his unexpected departure.

"I'm leaving for the Continent to-morrow—just two days before you're due to return, Jill," he had written. "I've been through hell the last three weeks, and if I stay in England after you come back I shall probably drag you through hell with me before very long. And there's just some rotten little spark of decency in me somewhere which makes me not want to do this. You've always been such a brick, and though I know I could make you happy in the long run, it would mean a march through hell for you first. So I'm taking myself off. I shall wander round Europe for a year and leave the coast clear to Quayne. If he makes good—well, for your sake, I'll try and stick it when I come back. But if he doesn't make you happy——" The sheet ended abruptly with a scrawled signature.

"Do you know—why—Garry's gone away?" Jill asked of Hazel.

Hazel nodded.

"Yes, I know," she answered. "He told me, and I think it's rather splendid of him."

Jill assented. Adding, after a moment: "I think I'm glad he's gone."

At that time, still pulsating and aglow with the memory of those rapturous three weeks in Italy, she was both glad and relieved at the knowledge of his departure. Her need of him as a comrade was obviated by the close and perfect relationship which existed betwixt herself and Straton, and the odd sense of fear which at times he had inspired in her was set at rest by his absence.

She had not quite forgiven him for that brief scene he had created on the day of her wedding, but now, mingled with her relief at the fact that he had gone away, was a certain admiration. She had not credited him with either

sufficient generosity or determination to do such a thing, and unconsciously her heart warmed a little towards him. Then, as the months slipped by, and Straton seemed to be drawn away from her into complete absorption in his work, she began to feel the lack of the old friendship with Garry. On dull afternoons it would have been jolly if he could have blown in unexpectedly, as he used to blow into her studio and have chatted and joked with her and sometimes played or sung her depression away.

Hazel, too, had been a much less frequent visitor of late, owing to Mrs. Kenyon's increasing delicacy. And she had enough troubles of her own to contend with, as Jill realised. Within the last few months she had learned the truth about her frail little mother's condition and knew that, although with great care it might be postponed for a time, the end was inevitably in sight. And since then, when she was not actually working, she spent every possible moment with her. Meanwhile, her marriage to Brett Forrester had been postponed indefinitely, and she almost seemed to grudge the time she passed with him away from her mother's side.

Brett, the arrogant and demanding, had been wonderfully amenable. It seemed as though the fragile wisp of a woman, who spent most of her days lying on a couch, with Death waiting inexorably at its foot, had worked a miracle in him. Nothing was too much for him to do for her. He kept her room gay with flowers, brought her books when a lull in the intense pain she frequently suffered permitted her to read, and waited upon her hand and foot. He it was who could carry her from one room to another without causing her any unnecessary pain, and hardly a day passed without his spending some hours at the studio flat. Sometimes, on what she

called one of her "good days," she would chaff him smilingly upon the change in him, and he would smile back at her and tell her that she had cast the devil out of him.

So that while the trio at the studio flat were drawn more and more closely together by circumstances, those same circumstances perforce robbed Jill to a great extent of Hazel's companionship and sympathy. Nor had she anyone else to whom she could turn and who might have set her thoughts travelling in a less bitter and self-centred direction. Sir Philip had not been very well lately, and the Brabazons had in consequence passed the entire winter in the south of France, nor, since their return to England, had they reopened the Audley Square house, but had remained at Lorne. Otherwise, Lady Susan's sane, breezy outlook on life might have helped to clear the atmosphere.

But although the Brabazons did not return to London, someone else did. Garry Lester came back in early April and took possession of his flat once more, and Jill's first meeting with him occurred unexpectedly one afternoon when she had gone to tea with the Kenyons. She had very little warning. Hazel had barely finished giving her the news of his return—"Only last evening I came rushing in rather late, collided with someone in the hall, surrounded by suit-cases, and found it was Garry"—when Madelon opened the sitting-room door and ushered in Garry himself. Her wrinkled old face was wreathed in smiles, for she had always had a very warm corner in her heart for *"Monsieur Laisterre."*

When first greetings had been exchanged, Jill had time to notice that Garry had altered. It was the same dark, clear-cut face, but older-looking. Something of the boy-

ish eagerness which had been one of its charms had gone out of it. Instead, there was a curious restless expression in the brown-grey eyes. Black panther—black panther—involuntarily Jill's thoughts flashed back to Hazel's light comment, uttered when they were staying down at Lorne nearly two years ago. She had once seen that same seeking, restless look in the eyes of a caged panther. Garry's mouth seemed to close differently, too—more strongly than it used to do. But it was a bitter, rebellious strength—not the strength of disciplined endurance.

Nevertheless, he was apparently in high spirits and seemed delighted to see everybody again, nor did he by look or word refer to the past—that past which lay exclusively betwixt himself and Jill—until they had left the flat and were walking along the street together.

"I've kept my word, you see, Jill," he said suddenly. "I've stayed awav a year—rather more, in fact."

"I know—I know," she answered, her breath coming rather quickly. "I'm glad you did. It—was decent of you."

"And has it worked the oracle?"

"I don't think I quite understand."

"Don't you?" It seemed to her that there was a jeering note in the short laugh which followed. "Then let me make my meaning clearer. Are you happy—quite happy?"

There was an infinitesimal pause, then Jill answered stoutly:

"Of course."

Garry glanced at her swiftly, a long, raking, sideways look, and a faint, derisive smile crossed his lips.

"So far, so good, then. I congratulate you. It's more

than most people can say—truthfully—after fifteen months of matrimony." He paused, but as she made no answer he continued lightly: "When may I come and pay my respects at Gilsborough Mansions?"

"Whenever you like, of course. Why, Garry"—Jill's voice trembled a trifle nervously—"you're not trying to be on ceremonious terms with an old pal, are you?"

He shook his head.

"Naturally not. I'll come along to see you whenever you want me."

But somehow she felt as though an indefinable barrier had arisen between them. When Garry finally paid his promised visit to the Gilsborough Mansions flat, he was unusually quiet. All his customary spirits appeared to have deserted him, and that easy give-and-take which had been characteristic of the old comradeship between himself and Jill was replaced by a certain little stiffness, as incomprehensible as it was unmistakable. Possibly Quayne's presence—Jill had invited Garry to dine with them—was in part responsible. Whatever it may have been, the evening was not a success, and Garry evinced no great haste to repeat his visit. During the following weeks Jill encountered him solely when she went to the studio flat to see the Kenyons. Here he seemed himself, the Garry she had always known, and meeting him only thus occasionally she gradually became conscious of the fact that she was missing him—missing daily in her own home the gay good-comradeship which had once played such a big part in her life and which now she only found at Chelsea—a comradeship that, like every friendship betwixt a man and woman, no matter how Platonic the lines on which it is supposedly run, held an indefinable something which gave it a touch of glamour.

If only Jill had had work of her own to do, this difficult bit of life would probably have been tided over fairly easily. Her mind would have been occupied, and the brief hours which she and her husband snatched together would have held the savour of something made inestimably rare and precious by the equal exigencies of both their lives. But the promise she had given Straton stood in the way of any such solution, and, having once given it, no thought of suggesting that it should be set aside entered her head. Up till now she had only been conscious of the emptiness of things in general and of a dull, smothered ache for the work which had once meant so much to her. And then, into soil only too well prepared to receive it, fate dropped a seed which was destined to bear bitter fruit.

It was merely a brief newspaper comment which found place in the midst of an article dealing with the Royal Academy exhibition—but the two short lines suddenly crystallised in words the whole loss of which Jill had been subconsciously aware.

". . . This year's Academy is the poorer by lack of any picture from Miss Wedderburn's vigorous yet peculiarly subtle brush."

She flung the newspaper down on the floor and, springing to her feet, walked over to the window, where she stood staring out blankly, all at once awake to the immensity of everything that she was missing.

Outside, in the gardens overlooked by the flat, spring was rioting. Sticky brown buds on the trees had uncurled to set free the narrow, tender young leaves they had been shielding from the winter's cold, the lawns below were misted over with the pale fresh green of newly shooting blades of grass, while a little breeze, soft

and balmy with faint, sweet fragrances, ran whispering from leaf to leaf.

Spring, with its throbbing promise of fruition—of accomplishment! It mocked her. For her the future stretched barrenly ahead—all her years of patient striving shorn of ultimate achievement. It didn't bear thinking of. Something seemed to clutch at her heart—something akin to panic. With a quick, impulsive movement she turned away from the window, from the sunlight sparkling mockingly all about her, and sped into the hall. Snatching the telephone receiver from its hook on the wall, she rang up Garry and waited, nervously impatient, until his voice came to her across the wire: "Hello!"

"Oh, Garry, is that you? Are you there?" There was a little breathless, hurried catch in her voice.

"Of course I am—always there when you want me."

The answer so exactly fitted her mood—like a warm cloak thrown around a shivering body—that she heaved a sigh of relief. She wanted to talk to someone, to get away from her own thoughts, and here at the other end of the wire was Garry—Garry, the old familiar comrade who had come to her rescue in the little ordinary things of daily life a hundred times.

"Well, I do want you," she answered him. "I—I think I'm bored, Garry."

"How's that?"

"This wretched play—it seems to have swallowed Straton up completely." Jill spoke very quickly, and the man at the other end of the wire could detect a slight nervous tremor in her tones. "He went out first thing this morning with Gaynor Melville and they're lunching together. So I'm alone."

"How entirely unnecessary—for you to be alone." Garry's answer came back cheerfully. "May I come to lunch, please?"

Jill's rather strained little face relaxed into a smile.

"Yes. Do," she said. And as she hung up the receiver once more it seemed to drop into its place with an affirmative click.

CHAPTER II

TWO'S COMPANY

HALF an hour later Garry arrived and Jill welcomed him with frank delight.

"I've ordered you a topping lunch," she told him gaily. "All the things you like best—unless your tastes have changed since we used to lunch in dear little Soho restaurants together?"

He shook his head.

"They haven't. My tastes, in all respects"—significantly—"are unaltered."

A faint flush ran up under her clear skin and she fenced lightly.

"They're more extravagant, surely?—Judging by the fine raiment you wear nowadays." She glanced quizzically at his well-groomed person, with its colour scheme of toning socks and handkerchief and immaculate tie. "That's *another* new suit, isn't it?"

Garry's eyes followed her glance.

"Yes. Thanks be to Uncle James, recently called to his long home, it is," he replied piously.

"You don't mean to say that Uncle James has died at last and left you everything?" exclaimed Jill. James Lester, a crabbed and wealthy old uncle of Garry's, had been hovering with one foot in the grave ever since Jill and Garry had first made each other's acquaintance, and they had often joked together about the possible palmy

days in store when he should at last shuffle off this mortal coil.

"Not he!" Lester shook his head. "My wildest hopes never carried me that far—seeing that the old chap disapproved of me with exceeding thoroughness. But he has remembered my existence to the extent of a few thousands—which will certainly help to round off life's corners a bit."

"And equally certainly keep you from ever doing a stroke of honest work for the rest of your days," supplemented Jill dryly.

Garry beamed at her.

"It's like old times, hearing you start lecturing me again," he said delightedly.

And suddenly, with a little warm rush of remembrance, Jill, too, felt as though the past had been all at once joined on to the present. It was so just like old times—Garry swaggering about in a brand-new suit, not yet paid for and very unlikely to be for many months to come, and she half seriously, half jokingly reproving him for his laziness and extravagance generally.

"All the same," continued Garry triumphantly, "you can't pitch into me quite so hard as you used to do, seeing you've come over to the drones yourself, now. *'This year's Academy is the poorer by lack of any picture from Miss Wedderburn's talented brush,'* " he quoted. "I read that—or words to that effect—in one of the papers this morning."

Her face clouded over. Garry, watching her, saw the sudden change in it and his eyes narrowed speculatively. But again she fenced.

"Oh, marriage is an occupation in itself," she returned. Adding involuntarily, "That's the worst of it."

"What do you mean?" queried Lester.

Jill regarded him with guarded blue eyes.

"It's so difficult to explain what one means—if one ever *does* mean anything—isn't it?" she said. And then, as Brayton came in to announce that lunch was ready, she sprang up from her chair and led the way into the dining-room.

Lunch was a jolly little meal. They dismissed Brayton, and Garry waited on her as he had been wont to do in the old days on the occasion of many an unpretentious small feast at the Chelsea flat. And presently, when the coffee was brought in, Jill insisted upon making it herself in a Cona machine at the table, and they both watched with tense absorption while it boiled up, lest it should overflow, and again while it trickled back into the container below, when they bet on the length of time it would take. Jill won, with a shriek or delight, and Garry promptly proposed "double or quits," and again she won.

"The most expensive cup of coffee I've had for months," he said, as he paid up.

"You might add, for politeness' sake, 'And one of the best'!" she suggested pertinently.

"Mais—ça va sans dire!"

It was all very young and absurd—just the inconsequent fun that bubbles up when two good comrades get together—but somehow it seemed to Jill to relieve some inner tension that had been stringing her up almost to breaking point. Usually she lunched alone, or, if Straton joined her, he generally appeared tired or preoccupied. In either case, she had her thoughts for company, and they seemed like so many small hammers beating relentlessly upon the same nerve until sometimes she wanted to

break the long, empty silences with a scream of sheer rage.

But to-day there were no long silences to break. Garry and she kept up a brisk flow of jokes and laughter—frequently familiar old jokes they had often made before. But that merely added a pleasant flavour of mutual reminiscence to them, and wove the past and present together again. When, finally, lunch over, they returned to the sitting-room, and Garry strolled across to the piano and began to play, she felt somehow restored to normal, and the intervening months of strain which matrimony had brought her became nebulous and unreal. It almost seemed to her, as she listened once more to Garry's firm, easy touch upon the keys, as though the old studio days were back again and she might jump up at any moment and say, as she had so often said: "Thanks awfully, Garry—I've just loved it. Now you really must clear out and let me work." And then Garry would reluctantly take his departure.

Suddenly, as he ceased playing and swung round on the piano stool, the actual facts rushed back upon her, rolling up like a voracious sea. Vaguely she was beginning to realise that just as his work was engrossing Straton, so her work would have engrossed her, had she had it, and she would have been spared the many hours of boredom and irritation which were the inevitable reaction upon her of this absorption of his. As it was, his life held the double thread of author and husband, hers but the single thread of wifehood. It wasn't fair.

"I don't think people like us—like Straton and me —ought ever to marry," she said suddenly. "Or at least, only as a side-show."

Garry smiled at her indulgently.

"What's the matter? Is your matrimonial complex out of order?" he inquired genially.

A faint smile tilted Jill's mouth. Garry was so incorrigibly absurd when he wanted to be cheering. She remembered it of old. And somehow it worked. In some odd fashion he did contrive to cheer one up.

"It's either that or liver," he pursued. "There's a marked similarity about the symptoms. I can prescribe for either, or both, anyway."

Jill's smile broadened.

"Can you? What's the cure, then, Garry?"

He shook his head.

"I won't go so far as to say my prescription's a positive cure, but it's certainly an—amelioration—for either state. I propose that we go along to tea at the Savoy, and dance."

Her face lit up. She hadn't danced since—oh, the months were almost too many to count up! Straton was a beautiful dancer, but he was always too busy, or too tired, to take her out. Garry was, if anything, the better dancer of the two men, and Jill's thoughts flew back to the many times she and he had danced together in the old Chelsea days, sometimes at a go-as-you-please affair in a big barn of a studio belonging to one or other of their mutual friends, sometimes—when Garry had just received his dividends or she had sold a picture and the exchequer was bulging—at the Savoy or elsewhere.

"I'd love that," she declared. "I'll tell Brayton to call a taxi." She made a gesture towards the bell, but Garry checked her.

"There's no need for a taxi," he said. Then, in answer to her look of blank inquiry: "I've got a jolly little car

of my own—also thanks to Uncle James—and it's waiting outside."

"Oh, Garry, how terribly nice!"

"It will be," he agreed. "I thought we might do some runs together out into the country—if you cared?"

Jill felt her spirits rising. It seemed as if all the jollinesses of life were returning—dancing, motoring, the swift, vivid movement which she loved. Having duly admired the car, she stepped into it and a few minutes later Garry, with a steady hand upon the wheel, was buzzing her in and out amongst the traffic. Just as he did everything well—except anything that was really work—so he drove the car well, and Jill, leaning back in her seat, was aware of a queer little thrill of anticipation—almost of excitement. And presently, when they reached the Savoy, amid the twinkle of lights and the gay rhythm of the music, she almost forgot how long and dull the days had seemed of late. The consciousness, oddly communicable, of other people around her enjoying themselves added to her own sense of pleasure.

"This is almost like old times," said Lester, as they returned to their tea-table after an inspiriting fox-trot.

Old times! How the familiar words kept cropping up!

"Almost," she agreed. A faint shadow showed itself in her eyes. The word "almost" holds on occasions so much significance.

Garry saw the shadow and interpreted it with his usual quickness of perception.

"Only we're not going back to the blessed old studio," he said. "The Kenyons are two dears—but they aren't you, you know, Jill. I miss you abominably—even your scoldings and being thrown out of the studio when you wanted to work. Why, I even miss my old enemy,

Omar," he added, laughter in his eyes. "By the way, has he settled down all right at Gilsborough Mansions?"

"Yes—at last. He ran away, back to Chelsea, three times. After that, we buttered his paws, and apparently he came to the conclusion that as I appeared to be permanently installed at the Mansions, he had better stay, too. . . . I think someone ought to have buttered my paws," she added inconsequently. "I don't seem to have settled down quite as well as Omar."

Lester made no answer. He was apparently intent upon lighting a cigarette. Jill, her glance wandering absently across the dancing floor, gave a sudden exclamation.

"Do you see who that is, Garry?" she said abruptly. Two people, a man and a woman, were just coming down the short flight of stairs leading from the *foyer*. Several heads turned towards them, eyes following the woman with the kind of startled admiration which unusual beauty calls forth. Lester looked up.

"Why, it's Iris Lethbridge," he said.

Jill acquiesced silently. That red-gold hair gleaming beneath the little pulled-on hat of green, the misty hyacinth-blue eyes, the long lines of the lissom figure were as familiar to her as her own face in the glass. With glowing, unerring brush-strokes she had once limned them all on canvas.

"I suppose she *is* still Miss Lethbridge—unless she has acquired a husband by now," went on Garry. "She was trying to hard enough when I ran across her at Monte Carlo."

"Did you meet her there? I knew that she and Lady Farnby had been travelling. They went abroad almost

immediately after I was married and I believe they've been out of England ever since."

Meanwhile Iris and her companion had seated themselves at one of the small tea-tables. All at once, almost as though some subconscious awareness of Jill's glance drew her own, she turned her head and looked in her direction. Recognition sprang into her face—recognition and something else as well, but she was too far away for Jill to discern that subtle something else which tinctured her expression. She rose and came across the room to where Lester and Jill were sitting, and by the time she reached them that familiar, charming, lazy smile of hers held nothing but its usual sweetness.

"I'm so glad to see you again," she said cordially. "And you, too, Mr. Lester. One feels as if one has really returned home when you've met someone you know. And we've been wanderers for so long, my aunt and I—we only returned to London yesterday. How is your husband?" she continued, addressing herself directly to Jill.

Her voice was perfectly cool and composed—so cool, that the recollection of that poignant scene in the studio which came back to Jill with sudden vividness seemed as though it must have been only the recollection of a dream. Surely no woman who had uttered that piteous, heart-shaking: "Have you forgotten—so soon?" could have contrived to speak of the man she had so much loved in a tone of such utter and complete detachment! And looking at the wonderful rose and gold beauty of her, Jill wondered how anything so built for love could possibly be so heartless—so superficial as she betrayed herself to be. If it was not betrayal, then it was a marvellous piece of acting.

"I expect both you and Straton——" ("Straton!" The name tripped from Iris's lips as lightly as though it were a name that meant nothing at all to her—had never meant anything.) "I expect you are both very busy. How many pictures have you in the Academy this year?"

"None," said Jill bleakly.

"None?" Iris looked taken aback. "But surely—why—you're not giving up painting?"

Jill lifted her head. Her face was rather white. There was a pale, proud defiance in her eyes and in the curve of her parted lips. What right had this woman—this woman who had loved Straton, whom Straton had once thought he loved—to pry and peer into their lives together, her own and his? It was nothing to do with Iris that she had given up painting—renounced it at Straton's express desire.

"I don't paint at all now," she said briefly.

A faint puzzlement showed in Iris's face. Obviously for the moment she could find no key to the enigma.

"Then matrimony has stolen you from the world at large," she said, with just the right amount of regret in her voice. "I must congratulate myself that my portrait was painted before such a catastrophe occurred. However"—she glanced expressively towards the crowded dance floor—"now you no longer paint you've more time for the amusements of life. I suppose," she added with a careless smile, "Straton has no time to spare for such frivolities?"

"Very little," returned Jill composedly.

"Ah, well, I'm sure Mr. Lester makes a very good substitute. We had some dances together at Monte Carlo last winter."

With a gracious little farewell nod she left them and

returned to her own table. Jill's glance followed her resentfully.

"I hate that woman!" she said suddenly.

"Do you? Why?" asked Garry in leisurely tones. "She's very beautiful—and quite unsuccessful. You've no reason to hate her."

"No, I suppose I haven't," she acknowledged. "But somehow I do. Omar did, too, by the way. He used to bristle all over whenever she came to the studio."

"He never manifested any particular affection for me, either," replied Garry rather grimly.

A flash of amused recollection glinted in Jill's eyes.

"No. Do you remember Hazel's explanation that it was because you were 'inimical to my fate'?"

For a moment Garry regarded her in silence. Then:

"Come and dance," he said abruptly.

He swept her away down the shining length of the polished floor, and in a few moments Jill had forgotten her annoyance with Iris, forgotten temporarily even that nagging little paragraph which had appeared in the morning's paper. There was something tremendously vivid and alive about Garry's dancing, it made you forget things—that, and the intriguing, syncopated tempo of the dance. Once she looked up into his eyes bent above her. They were curiously bright and held an odd tensity of expression before which her own glance fell.

It was late by the time Jill returned home. Garry ran her back in his car and left her, bubbling over with good spirits, at the door of the Mansions, and when the lift had carried her up to her own flat she found that Straton had already emerged from his study preparatory to dressing for dinner.

"Been down to the Kenyons, darling?" he greeted her.

"No, not this afternoon," she answered. And then stopped confusedly. Quite suddenly, for no definite reason, she was aware of a feeling of embarrassment in telling him what she *had* been doing. It was ridiculous, of course, but the remembrance of his earlier jealousy of Garry—almost forgotten during the latter's long absence from England—had all at once returned to her in full force, bringing with it a certain nervous self-consciousness.

"I've been dancing at the Savoy," she vouchsafed. "With Garry."

There was a scarcely perceptible pause, then Quayne said quietly:

"Enjoyed it?"

She nodded.

"Yes. Quite a lot. And now I must really fly and dress for dinner. You, too, Straton, or you'll be late. Are you dining in to-night?"

He opened the door for her and slipped an arm about her shoulders as they passed through the doorway together.

"Yes, I'm dining in to-night," he said.

Ordinarily she would have given him some quick, appreciative response. Their evenings alone together were so rare. But somehow, to-night, it wouldn't have mattered to her very much if she had been spending the evening in solitude. She had enjoyed the afternoon so vividly. Garry was such a splendid playfellow—and they were going to play together very often in future. Life had begun again—not life with that big central moving force of work that she loved. But a playtime life—full of jolly, interesting things to do. They would at least stop her

thinking—and regretting. And it was good when a playfellow you have missed comes back into your life again.

The newspaper lay on a chair in her room, just where she had thrown it down when she went upstairs to dress before going out with Garry. *"This year's Academy is the poorer——"* Jill re-read the paragraph which had so stung and smarted this morning.

"Oh, well——" she said, her eyes a little hard. And screwing the newspaper up into a ball she tossed it into the waste-paper basket.

CHAPTER III

DISCORD

MAY had slipped into June, slipped so quickly that Jill could hardly believe that a whole month had gone by since the day when, in a sudden mood of desperation, she had telephoned to Garry Lester. She had been utterly bored at the time—bored with the meaningless succession of days which held neither work nor play.

But she had not been bored since. Garry had seen to that. He seemed to have flashed back into her life like a meteor, irradiating everything with his sheer vitality. At first, she had wondered a little if Straton would resent the habit he quickly formed of dropping in informally at the flat, the frequent motor-trips which she made with him into the country, lunching at some old inn and returning to town in time for dinner, the theatres and dances which they shared together. Swayed by a subconscious feeling of defiance, she made no attempt to conceal his comings and goings from her husband, and the old hostility between the two men might easily have given rise to a certain amount of opposition on Quayne's part.

Apparently, however, he remained oblivious, absorbed in his work. His play had been successfully produced and was nightly playing to a crowded house, and Straton himself was now concentrating on the final chapters of his new novel. So that Jill was free to go about and en-

joy herself as much as she liked, and if, as she had once told Garry, the play had appeared to swallow him up, it seemed now as though a whirl of amusement had swallowed up Jill herself.

And the fact that Straton seemed to care so little added a curious bitter zest to this new way of life, gave her a rebellious sense of rightful freedom in all that she did. It had hurt at first, that indifference of his. Almost unconsciously she had hoped that he would interfere, manifest some disapproval. But apparently, she told herself, he cared so much for his work—and, by comparison, so little for his wife—that it mattered nothing to him what she did, nor how she found her amusement and interest in life, provided she made no claims upon his valuable time.

A deep resentment took birth in her heart. She had given so much, given up so much, in marrying Quayne, and now that the gift was made, now that he was sure of her, she had become a secondary consideration in his life. Bitterly she recalled what Lady Susan had said: *"Ninety-nine men out of a hundred haven't the remotest idea of downright fair play with a woman—least of all, after they're married. There's no need for it then, you see."* The straight, clean cut of the sharp-edged speech went right to the root of the matter. It was true—true. That being so, she would take whatever the gods offered, and the gods—in the shape of Garry Lester—offered quite a good deal by way of amusement. And amusement—constant, ceaseless amusement was a very good anodyne to pain. It stifled it—didn't give you time to look at it or think about it.

It was on a blazingly hot day towards the end of June that Quayne apparently woke up to a realisation of the

way things were drifting. Jill had come in from playing tennis, and he discovered her lying down on a couch, looking rather white and exhausted from the heat. A few days previously Hazel had been dining with them and a remark she had made flashed back into his mind. "I don't think Jill's looking quite up to the mark," she had said. And he had responded lightly enough that it was probably due to the heat in town—that she would be all right when they went down to Quayling at the end of July. Now he regarded his wife with a sudden quick glance of concern. It was a fact; she was not looking well. Her face seemed thinner, and there were dark violet shadows under her eyes. Moreover, it was a very unusual thing to find her lying down.

"What have you been doing?" he asked. "You look dead beat."

"Playing tennis," she answered listlessly. "I had rather a hard set with Garry, and it was very hot up at the courts."

"It was absurd of you to play in this heat," he commented with sudden irritation.

Nerves are easily frayed in hot weather, and the irritable note in his voice awakened all Jill's dormant resentment.

"One must do something," she said coldly.

For an instant a dangerous glint showed itself in Quayne's deep-set eyes. Then, as though putting a deliberate restraint upon himself, he answered quietly:

"Yes, I suppose one must. And we haven't done anything together for quite a long time, have we? What do you say to going up the river this afternoon?"

Jill regarded him silently a moment between her thick double fringe of lashes. Last year, before he had be-

come so wrapped up in his work, they had often gone up the river together—before, as she told herself bitterly, the novelty of matrimony had begun to wear off. His suggestion pricked her to an odd little sense of pain. It was like the dull, smothered tingling of the nerve of a tooth which had once ached badly.

"Well, what do you say?" he asked, as she made no answer.

"I've already fixed to go up the river this afternoon—with Garry," she said.

It was Quayne's turn to be silent. Again that dangerous glint showed itself in his eyes, so that they shone hard like steel beneath the stern brows that overhung them.

"Don't you go out rather often with Lester?" he said at last. He spoke very quietly, but his voice sounded taut—taut like stretched whipcord.

Jill brought her glance back from the window, through which it had wandered. Hitherto, she and Straton had preserved an outward peace, but now she felt instinctively that they were on the verge of open warfare. Somehow she could no longer pretend, and her resentful sense of injury, of having been robbed—robbed of the work which had once made her happy and given nothing in exchange—tinctured her voice with a chill bitterness as she answered him.

"Since you're not able to take me out yourself, I should have thought you would have been pleased that there was someone else ready to take me off your hands."

Quayne's face went rather white.

"You speak as if I never wanted to take you out," he said. "You know that my work occupies most of my time."

"The more reason you should be glad that Garry is at liberty to go about with me. The days of the patient Griselda are past, you know," she added, her lip curling a little. The words flicked him like the tip of a whiplash.

"All I want is that you shouldn't get yourself talked about," he retorted sharply.

Jill sat up suddenly on the couch. Her eyes were very wide and searching.

"Who talks, pray?" she demanded swiftly.

"Well, I met Iris Lethbridge and her aunt in Bond Street the other day, and they chanced to mention that they'd seen you at several different places with Lester."

Iris Lethbridge! Jill's mind went quickly back to various occasion when she and Garry had chanced to run across her.

"You mean Iris did," she replied. "I haven't met Lady Farnby since they returned from abroad. So"—slowly—"you allow Iris to comment on what I do? I think—I'm a little surprised at you, Straton."

The sneer was palpable, but he refused to let it turn him from his point.

"You are right," he responded quietly. "It was Iris, not Lady Farnby, who mentioned the matter—merely in the ordinary course of conversation. But the fact remains that your going about so much with Lester lays you open to comment. So I should prefer you to see rather less of him."

Jill sprang up from the couch, her eyes blazing. That coolly autocratic "I should prefer" was like a spark to tinder. For months she had borne so much, suffered so much in sore and proud silence, that now it seemed as though all at once she could endure no longer.

"'You should prefer'!" she broke out in a low voice,

shaken with anger. "Has it ever occurred to you to think that *I* 'might prefer' to have someone to go about with, to talk to and amuse me while you are shut up in your study? It's been your work—*your* work"—bitterly—"all the time. Nothing else has mattered. I—your wife—might go to the wall. It's true what Lady Susan once told me—horribly true."

Quayne wheeled round.

"What Lady Susan told you? What did she tell you?" he demanded swiftly.

"That ninety-nine men out of a hundred haven't any idea of fair play with a woman after they're married. Because there's no need for it then—afterwards," she said contemptuously. "And it's true—true—as true about you as about other men." She turned away with a gesture of finality.

"It's *not* true." He made a step towards her and, catching her by both arms, forced her to face him. "You'll take that back, Jill." He waited, as though confident of her compliance, but she shook her head.

"No," she said hardly. "I won't take it back. Oh, can't you *see* that it's true? You've been too absorbed in your own affairs to trouble about mine—to care"—she forced back a sob that struggled in her throat—"and now that I've learned to find my own amusement, you turn round and say you'd 'prefer' I did this or that!"

"And my wishes have no weight with you? Have we drifted as far as that, Jill girl?" Instead of the outburst of anger which she anticipated, he spoke very quietly, an odd note of wistfulness underlying his deep voice.

She hesitated, momentarily softened by that appeal in his tones. Then the memory of the last few months rushed over her again, obliterating all else.

"Yes, I think we have," she said stonily. "I think we have, if you let Iris—the woman you once cared for—comment on what I do. Apparently, what Iris thinks matters much more than—what I have been thinking all these months."

"It matters very much that anyone should be able to criticise my wife," he returned sternly.

"But more, I suppose, if Iris does. She still—counts."

"Jill!" Quayne spoke incredulously. "You can't possibly think that!"

"What else can I think? All these months you haven't bothered one way or the other. I might do as I chose—stay at home and be bored, or go out and amuse myself. And now, because you've met Iris—Iris—and she has dared to criticise me, you allow yourself to be influenced by what she says. Naturally I think she still counts."

"Then you are wrong—utterly and entirely wrong." He paused a moment, then went on: "I know that I've been preoccupied lately; I'll admit that I've let my work absorb more of my time than was fair to you. I see that. But there's only one woman in my world who counts—and you know it."

She gave a queer little strangled laugh. All the repressed bitterness of months had risen to the surface.

"Oh, Straton, I thought it—once. I wish I could believe it now. But I can't. You've shown me—for so long—how little I count." She got up. "I—I think I'll go now," she said rather wearily, turning towards the door.

He laid his hands on her shoulders.

"No," he said suddenly, "you won't go—not like that. Good God, are we going to make shipwreck of our happiness on a single rock?"

She turned back.

"On a single rock? It's been rocks—big and little rocks—all the time. And—and"—her voice quivered—"I'm tired of being bruised against them."

There was something piteous in that young, shaken voice, and all at once the whole passion and tenderness of Quayne's love for this woman with the hurt eyes welled up, rising high above his stunned bewilderment and anger.

"Jill—Jill, darling"—he drew her fiercely into his arms—"I never knew—never realised. Why didn't you tell me before instead of letting me go blundering on?"

But although once she would have yielded instantly to the clasp of his arms about her, now she leaned away from him, her slender body rigid and unresponsive.

"Tell you?" She laughed, but there was no mirth in her laughter. "I've shown you—said things sometimes. But you never saw—never understood. And now because another man—an old friend, Garry—has seen, knew that I was lonely and bored, you're . . . jealous."

His arms tightened round her.

"Yes!" he said savagely. "I am—jealous. No man who loves a woman as I love you could be anything else. Jill"—his voice deepened to a sudden urgent pleading—"put Lester off for this afternoon, and come with me."

She hesitated, for a moment sorely tempted to yield. Then a rush of loyalty to Garry—to Garry who had come to her when she had been unbearably lonely, swayed her. With it, too, came the remembrance that it was Iris—Iris whose remarks had prompted Straton's original demand.

"No," she said, driven by an impulse that she hardly understood. "No, I won't do that."

She felt the clasp of Straton's arms relax abruptly.

"Then you put Lester—before me?" His voice was curiously harsh, and she looked up, startled, to meet his eyes so burning with anger that she almost blenched.

"Straton—it's not that——" she faltered. His point of view had not presented itself to her. A strange, confused mixture of impulses had prompted her to refuse what he asked, but in her mind there had been no thought of making a definite choice in the matter betwixt Garry and her husband. And now he was forcing it to this issue, chose to interpret it so.

"It's not that," she repeated.

"It is that. You are putting Lester before me," he replied remorselessly.

"No, I'm not," she protested. "It isn't fair of you, Straton. I *promised* Garry."

"And you intend to keep that promise?" The dry, incisive tones roused her to a sudden passion of revolt. She faced him, her small dark head defiantly flung up, eyes stormy as his own.

"Yes, I do intend to keep it."

For a moment they confronted each other in a silence that held only the soundless clash of opposing wills. Then he bent his head.

"So be it," he said.

Wheeling round, he strode out of the room, leaving Jill staring blankly at the door as it closed behind him.

CHAPTER IV

THE BOLTED DOOR

THE afternoon's expedition up the river was not precisely a success. Jill, in spite of her best efforts to appear as gay and nonchalant as usual, kept falling into fits of moody abstraction, until at last Garry demanded to know what was the matter.

"Nothing," she told him. Then, honesty prevailing, she corrected herself with: "At least, nothing I could tell you."

He made no comment, but she felt his eyes rake her face with a long, speculative stare before he bent to his oars again. For an instant she wondered, with a slight feeling of panic, whether he would insist upon an explanation, and she was conscious of a sense of gratitude when he refrained.

She could hardly explain things to herself, let alone to anyone else. Her interview with Straton seemed to have taken its own course, got out of hand, sweeping them both, as it were, irresistibly along into the deep waters of misunderstanding. In the beginning, she had merely voiced the resentment which had been growing within her for months past. She had had no intention of telling him, of letting him see how much he had hurt her, but his unfortunate reference to Iris's comments had spurred her into sudden speech. Even then, if Straton had only understood—only *tried* to understand, she

thought—they might together have unravelled the twisted skein which married life had woven for them. But, instead, he had been imperious and autocratic—everything that in her present mood set her tingling with a renewed sense of injury and rebellion. And then, at the end, he had chosen to treat her decision to keep her engagement with Garry as though it were the making of a definite choice between her husband and another man. She had had no such thought, and the injustice of it rankled.

Straton's face as he left her, chill and hard like iron, kept recurring to her mind. If he had only shown himself a little sorry or hurt it would have been so easy to have told him how much she herself had been hurt, and then together they might have bridged over the gulf which had been gradually widening between them. There had been just one softened moment during the interview when they had trembled upon the verge of mutual understanding—when Straton had said, with that undertone of wistfulness in his voice: "Have we drifted as far as that, Jill girl?" Jill remembered the sudden impulse to make friends again which had sprung up responsively within her, only to be as quickly checked by the remembrance that he had allowed another woman, had allowed Iris to criticise her. And then the moment had passed, and they had gone on saying hard and bitter things to each other until, in the end, it seemed as though a solid wall had built itself between them which neither of them would ever be able to scale.

So that Garry had a very silent and abstracted companion up the river that afternoon. Somehow he seemed to understand that she did not want to be worried with explanations, and he did not press for any. But he contrived to surround her with a quiet, unobtrusive atmos-

phere of friendly sympathy that was very comforting. It brought healing of a kind, and unconsciously and inevitably Jill was driven into contrasting the two men —the harshness of the one with the unexpressed tenderness of the other. And it is bad for any woman when, however momentarily, she is able to contrast her husband to his disadvantage with another man.

Lester held her hands longer than was absolutely necessary when he parted from her at the door of Gilsborough Mansions. His eyes, looking down into hers, held a curious, tense expression. It was almost as though he were trying, wordlessly, to convey to her some thought that was in his mind. And all at once the recollection of that brief scene which had occurred on her wedding day flashed back into hers—of Garry grasping her by the arms and gazing down at her with passionate, stormy eyes, and of his voice shaken with the desperation of inevitable parting: *"I understand you—Quayne doesn't."*

Almost dragging her hands from his clasp, she turned and went swiftly into the house. He made no effort to detain her, and before she entered the lift she heard the hum of his car as it slid away from the kerb outside.

Her heart was beating rather fast as the lift mounted. She was conscious of a sudden dismayed sense of danger —of the old fear of Garry which had before possessed her on more than one occasion. Had she been foolish to let him see so much of her—rather playing with fire? A little tremulously she opened the door of the flat, and as it closed behind her she felt a thrill of relief in the familiar, happy safety of the four walls of her own home.

Had Straton happened to come in at that moment she would have turned to him almost as a frightened child may turn to a grown-up. Intuitively she was conscious

of his quiet strength, knew that if Garry's headlong passion had broken bounds and almost swept her away, it was to Straton she would have turned for succour. And, deep within herself, she knew also that she would not have turned in vain.

Whatever his faults, she felt confident that he would never fail her if she called upon him in one of the big emergencies of life. Even though he did not care for her as much as she had once believed—her heart gave a little sickening thud as she faced this fact—even though his work, his work and the ambition and fame which were an intrinsic part of it, occupied the foreground of his thoughts, still she knew, with a curious inner certainty, that there were certain claims to which he would always answer as a vessel to its helm—and one of those was the claim of the woman to whom he had given his name.

But Straton did not come in, and Jill crouched in her chair feeling all at once forlorn and rather lost. Garry was a dear. His gaiety matched her own, and he underderstood her moods and tenses with the sensitive intuition that was a part of his make-up. More than that, he loved her with all the rather dangerous ardour of his temperament—and there is no woman who can remain totally unmoved by a man's love, even though she may not return it. But, none the less, Jill knew that she did not utterly trust Garry. When it came to a pull betwixt his own desires and the ultimate happiness and good of any woman, it would be a very open question as to which would win.

Vaguely she was conscious of this fact. She did not say so to herself in so many words, but certain things that she sensed in Garry she had thrust away from her

with a little frightened feeling. She wished she and Straton had not drifted so far apart, that she had not spoken so bitterly earlier in the day. There was a dull ache in her heart which only a better understanding between herself and him could ever cure. She had been hiding it from herself all these weeks, hiding it beneath a daily, hourly pursuit of amusement. The search after pleasure had been instinctive, born of the desire not to think—not to have time to think and recognise the heart-ache and unhappiness which beset her—and the desire to stifle the dread that she counted for less in her husband's life than one of his books. And that look on Straton's face when he had quitted her had suddenly forced upon her the conviction of the truth. No man who cared could have so bitterly misunderstood her, so cruelly misinterpreted her actions. He did not care any longer; he was merely angry that "his wife should be talked about."

His wife! The wife of the famous author! That was all that mattered. It was all part and parcel of that egregious masculine vanity and self-centredness which had dictated that she should give up her own work as an artist when she married him. And she had given it up—glad in a way that she could prove her love for him by this big sacrifice.

At first she had hardly realised how big a sacrifice it was. He had surrounded her so with love that every bit of it had seemed worth while. And it would always have seemed worth while if that love had lasted. But gradually his work had absorbed him and she had had to content herself with the occasional crumbs he found time to give her. And then, when she had discovered someone else—something else to fill up the emptiness of

her life, he had turned round and found fault with her. Oh, it wasn't fair! It wasn't fair!

Bitterness and longing, wave after wave flowed over her, and the bleak, bare outlook ahead filled her with a terrifying sense of loss and loneliness. She did not know how she was to bear it. The remembrance of those perfect days when none of these misunderstandings had come between her and Straton tore at her heart. If only they could get back . . . get back. . . . A stifled sob broke from her.

Gradually her sense of resentment died down, overwhelmed by the longing for reconciliation. Surely they two had not yet drifted so far apart that they could not find their way back to the old happiness which had once been theirs. She began to blame herself. If only she had not lost her temper this morning and given utterance to all the bitterness that had lain in her heart! Perhaps Straton had had a certain amount of right on his side. There is generally right on both sides—and wrong. When he came back she would tell him she was sorry—talk things out with him, try to see his point of view and get him to see hers. Surely, between them . . . between them . . .

At last, tired out with the emotions which were warring within her, she dropped asleep, her last conscious thought that when Straton came back she would tell him she was sorry—sorry.

"Dinner is served, madam."

Jill woke with a start to the sound of Brayton's quiet, respectful accents. She sprang up from her chair.

"Good gracious, do you mean that dinner's ready?" she exclaimed in a startled voice. "I—I've been asleep.

How long has Mr. Quayne been in? I never heard him come."

"No, madam. He hasn't come in. He's just telephoned that you were not to wait dinner for him, as he wouldn't be back."

Jill's heart missed a beat, then raced furiously. He hadn't come back—to-night of all nights! Evidently the fact that they had quarrelled mattered nothing to him. If it had, if he had been sorry as she had been sorry, he would have come. Only now, when she knew he was not coming, did she realise how much she had been hoping—counting upon the outcome of this evening. The bitterness of her disappointment sent a hard, choking feeling into her throat, and she put her hand up to it involuntarily. Then she remembered that Brayton was still waiting, standing there with the imperturbable detachment of the well-trained English servant. She wondered how much he had guessed—read in her face? With an effort she pulled herself together.

"Ask Mrs. Brayton to keep dinner back a few minutes while I dress," she said composedly, and picking up her coat, which she had tossed on to a chair, she went swiftly out of the room.

She was glad of the respite gained by the short time it took her to hurry into an evening frock, and when finally she entered the dining-room not even Brayton's shrewd eyes could have detected anything amiss. But, although outwardly composed, the solitary repast required all her efforts to carry it through successfully. She felt as though each mouthful must choke her, and she was thankful when at last the meal came to an end and she could take refuge in the solitude of the sitting-room.

Omar, who was lying curled up on the big black

cushion sacred to his use, rose and came towards her, arching his back and purring loudly, and as soon as she sat down he leaped on to her knee and settled himself there companionably. Somehow, even the big cat's presence conveyed an odd sense of comfort, and after a little time, as Jill's hand passed rhythmically to and fro across his sleek fur, her first keen sense of disappointment at Straton's absence from dinner faded, and various reasons that might account for it presented themselves. Probably he had been detained unexpectedly, she argued. He would surely be coming soon. He might be in any time now.

For a little while the thought that something unforeseen had detained him reassured her, but as the time went on—nine, ten o'clock—the strain of waiting began to fret her nerves, already jangled with the day's happenings. What could have occurred to keep him? Why did he not come? Had he stayed away deliberately—to punish her for going up the river with Garry against his wishes?

Eleven! The silvery strike of the little clock on the chimneypiece made her jump. Half an hour later she heard the muffled clang of the lift gates, then the sound of a key turning in the flat door, and a moment afterwards Straton came in. Tumbling Omar unceremoniously off her knees, she sprang to her feet.

"Oh, Straton, where have you been?" She spoke almost breathlessly.

"Dining with Jim Carston. I ran across him in Piccadilly, and as he was alone——"

For a moment Jill could hardly believe her ears. He had been dining, dining with some man friend—yarning and telling good stories together, probably—while she had

been through hours of misery and suspense. That was all he had cared, then! Their quarrel this morning, outcome of months of misunderstanding, had meant nothing to him.

"So have I been alone!" she burst out in a low, choked voice.

Quayne made a sudden step towards her.

"Did you want me?" he said.

For a moment she hesitated. Something in his voice arrested her—some quality of held-back eagerness and longing. Then, for she had been bitterly hurt, her pride rose defensively.

"No," she said coolly, the words as incisive as the cut of a knife, "I didn't want you."

She went slowly towards the door, and in silence he followed and held it open for her. His face was white, but his expression was quite impenetrable as he watched her cross the hall and go into her bedroom. A moment later a little sound clicked across the silence—the sound of the bolt of her door as it shot into its socket.

CHAPTER V

THE NEXT DAY

BREAKFAST, the following morning, was a strained and uncomfortable meal. Quayne, though scrupulously polite, was very grave and silent, while Jill herself was nervous and unstrung, sensing his anger and feeling oddly helpless against it. She had repented her impetuous action of the previous evening in bolting her door against him, and had come into the dining-room tremulously eager and ready to atone. And then Straton's cool, distant manner had suddenly made it impossible for her to utter the words which trembled on her lips. So the meal proceeded in oppressive silence, Quayne confining his attention to his morning's letters, while Jill, having none, took refuge in the newspaper, leaving the food on her plate practically untasted.

Presently she heard the grating of his chair as he pushed it back from the table. He had finished his breakfast, then! In another moment he would have gone into his study, and that firmly closed door would shut her out for the rest of the morning. She moistened her lips.

"Straton——" Her voice was very faint. It isn't easy to try and make peace with someone who is apparently almost unaware of your presence.

Quayne paused, his hand on the back of his chair.

"Did you speak?" he asked.

But at the sound of his voice, hard and uncompro-

mising, her courage suddenly failed her and she shook her head mutely.

"I thought, perhaps, you might have something to say in regard to your conduct last night," he pursued. "If not, I have."

Jill half rose from her chair. There was something in his tone, some note of finality, that set her pulses beating jerkily.

"What—what is it?" she faltered.

"Merely this. Last night you showed me exactly how you feel towards me. . . . You need never trouble to bolt your door again; it won't be necessary."

"But I didn't mean—Straton—it wasn't——"

She stumbled hopelessly and trailed off into silence, wearily aware that she could neither explain nor minimise in his eyes what she had done. Nor did he try to help her out. To a man of Quayne's nature, his sensitiveness masked against the world by an arrogant, imperious pride, that closing of her door had been a deliberate shutting of him out of her life—a decree which he would never stoop to ask her to rescind. He gave it its full and ultimate significance, never realising that it had been actually no more than the momentary, impetuous gesture of a girl who had been unbearably hurt.

"We needn't discuss the matter," he continued, still in that same hard, unrelenting voice. "You've laid down the lines of our future life together—made your decision, and I accept it."

Jill's hands, clasped in front of her like a child's, gripped each other convulsively. This was the end then! It was true—true that Straton no longer loved her. The whole fabric of their mutual happiness—all the shy, sacred visions which she had once had of what their life

together would mean—had come crashing headlong to the ground. There was nothing left—never could be anything again. Life had proved stronger than love.

"There need be no outward difference in our life together." She came out of the bewildered chaos of her thoughts to find that he was speaking again—indicating, quite coolly and collectedly, the lines on which henceforth their life would run. "I suppose we can behave with ordinary civility to one another, just as other husbands and wives who find they've made a big mistake contrive to do."

"I suppose so," she answered dully.

She felt as though the whole happening must be a bad dream. It was unrealisable. Difficult and unhappy as the last few months had been, nothing had occurred to rule out the ultimate possibility of a better understanding between herself and Straton. But now the end had come. It was quite clear to her that he had ceased to care for her. If not, he would never have accepted without protest what he regarded as a deliberate decision on her part. So she argued, reckoning without the bitter pride of a man who had learned distrust of woman's love in a hard school—that pride which is neither more nor less than instinctive self-protection against further hurt.

"I'm—I'm sorry, Straton," she said miserably.

"You needn't be. We've made a mistake, but"—with a touch of that light cynical philosophy so characteristic of him as she had first known him—"no mistake is irreparable. And this is one which can be covered up quite successfully as far as the outside world is concerned."

Gathering up his letters, which still lay on the breakfast table, he turned and left the room, and an instant later Jill heard the familiar, inexorable closing of his study

door. She walked slowly across to the open window and stood there, staring out blindly, stunned by the suddenness with which her woman's house o' dreams had come tumbling about her ears. How long she stood there she did not know. It might have been five minutes, ten minutes, half an hour—she had lost all count of time—when suddenly the telephone bell sounded shrilly from the hall.

Probably it was Garry ringing up to know whether she would go out somewhere with him. Heavens! Was it only yesterday morning that he and she had been playing tennis together? Twenty-four short hours ago! And since then first one thing and then another—hard speeches, silly, unconsidered actions, the grate of temperament against temperament, following upon months of strain—had contrived to wreck everything in life that mattered.

Supposing it were Garry waiting at the other end of the telephone wire, what should she do? The question flashed upon her mind as she crossed the hall. Then the sight of Straton's closed study door decided her. He had arranged his life—life without her—very easily. Henceforth she would arrange hers without regard to him—take whatever friendship and amusement offered. She lifted down the receiver.

"Hallo! Is that you, Garry?"

The study door opened and Straton looked out.

"Is that a call for you, or me? I'm expecting one," he said. He spoke quite naturally, as though nothing untoward or out of the ordinary had occurred that morning.

But Jill hardly heeded his question. Her face had suddenly whitened and her fingers closed convulsively round the receiver.

"Oh, Straton!" In the stress of the moment she, too, spoke quite naturally, turning to him with shocked, dilated eyes. "Oh, Straton, it's Hazel ringing up. I must go down to the flat. Mrs. Kenyon isn't expected to live more than a day or two. And Hazel wants me there—with her."

"Of course." Quayne took the receiver gently from her and replaced it on its hook. "Tell Mrs. Brayton to pack your suit-case while I ring up a taxi. It'll be quicker than getting out the car, and I'll go down with you and see if there's anything I can do."

The old kindly reassuring note had come back into his voice. This was the Straton she knew—quiet and utterly stable in emergency. She looked up at him with some surprise.

"Will you really come?" she said.

He smiled a little.

"Yes—unless you'd rather I did not?"

She made an impulsive gesture.

"You know—you know I would not," she answered quickly.

Presently they were sitting side by side in the taxi, speeding towards Chelsea, quietly talking together of Hazel and of the frail, tired little woman to whom the dark angel could but come kindly, as the Great Deliverer. Everything else, even the morning's happenings, had faded into temporary insignificance beside the sudden tremendous reality of death.

CHAPTER VI

UNDER THE OAK TREE

JILL lay swinging gently to and fro in a hammock slung from the boughs of a giant oak at Quayling, the green canopy of leaves above her pleasantly tempering the afternoon heat of the August sun. She had been reading, but the book had not proved a particularly engrossing one, and when it chanced to slip from her lap to the ground below she had let it lie where it fell, while her thoughts travelled musingly backward over the events of the last few weeks—back to the day when that sudden ringing of the telephone bell and Hazel's agonised summons had cut abruptly across the tangled thread of her own affairs. There had followed a few sad and terrible days at the Chelsea flat—so few, so sad, while they waited for the inevitable end. And at last it had come and Hazel's little mother had slipped painlessly—for towards the end all pain had mercifully left her—out of this world into the next.

Hazel herself had been very wonderful during those last days. "I don't *want* her to live," she had told Jill with quivering lips. "If she did, it only means more pain." But as soon as it was all over she had collapsed badly. Her mother's illness had been a long strain, and when the need for keeping up was past it almost seemed as though Hazel's vitality were exhausted. It was then that Jill was thankful for Brett's presence. He had been

at the flat daily, and as soon as the simple funeral was over he carried Hazel off to Lorne, where Lady Susan, who had been tied there by Sir Philip's decision to spend the summer in Devonshire, was waiting to mother her back to health and strength.

Meanwhile, Jill returned to Gilsborough Mansions, to find that the enforced break had simplified the readjustment of her life with Straton. He welcomed her back with a certain cool cordiality which immediately set the key of their future relationship, and as the days wore on she found that he never deviated from it. Uniformly courteous and considerate, his attitude yet held a kind of detachment that set them as far apart from each other as though they lived at opposite poles.

Remembering him as he used to be, passionate, jealous, autocratic—and at times so infinitely tender—she found the change in him bewildering. It was as though all these attributes—some of them, maybe, difficult to deal with but at least human—had been crushed out, leaving only the impervious hardness of cold steel. Once or twice she had made a tentative effort to hold out the olive branch, but her attempts were so completely ignored that she came to the conclusion that Straton was deliberately refusing to see them. After that, pride came to her rescue, and she made up her mind that henceforth, neither by word or look, would she ever let him think that she asked or desired anything more than he had chosen to give her.

At the end of July they left town for Quayling, and here the usual pleasant round of country life, with its picnics, tennis-parties, and other diversions, helped to lessen the strain under which she had been living. At first she had rather dreaded going down to Doon St.

Frances, since, this summer—so Lady Susan had written her—the Chace had been reopened and Lady Farnby was preparing to entertain a succession of house-parties there. Jill had inwardly recoiled from the idea of meeting Iris again, but when the time actually came she found it easier than she had anticipated. Iris, after all, had no knowledge that any comment of hers had been the precipitating cause of trouble between the Quaynes, so that she greeted Jill quite naturally the first time they met, and afterwards, when the social amenities of the neighbourhood chanced to bring them together, Jill adroitly contrived to have as little to say to her as possible.

Hazel, of course, was still at Lorne, gaining daily in health and spirits, and Lady Susan, entirely ignorant of all that had been passing in the Quayne *ménage,* had invited her beloved Garry down for the month of August. It followed naturally that he and Jill were almost as much together as they had been while in London, but up till now Straton had refrained from any comment. Once or twice Jill thought she had seen his face harden curiously when Garry was present, and he was invariably coolly negative in his manner towards the younger man. Outwardly, however, peace was preserved.

Brett Forrester, meanwhile, divided his time between Lorne and his own property of White Windows—setting his house in order, as he gaily explained, against the time when he should take Hazel there as its mistress. The wedding date had not yet been actually fixed, although it was not likely now to be long delayed, and Jill's thoughts, as she lay musing in her hammock, drifted almost inevitably from her own marriage to Hazel's. She wondered if she would be happy? Marriage, in her own experience, was a dreadfully uncertain thing, and the worst of it was

that the trouble, when it came, seemed to grow out of such disproportionately insignificant things. And in marriage, when happiness was gone, there was nothing else to take its place—not even work.

Work! Oh, if only she could have gone back to the old studio days when work had meant everything to her! Even now, with a brush between her fingers, she felt that she might have found distraction from the misery of her thoughts—found something to fill up the emptiness of her life. But work—the work she loved—was forbidden her. She had given it up at Straton's bidding, not realising then how great a sacrifice he was exacting from her. She had realised it bitterly enough since. Several times while she had been at the Chelsea flat, when Mrs. Kenyon was sleeping quietly and for the moment there was nothing she could do to help, she had stolen down into the empty studio and wandered forlornly round amongst the ghost-ridden tools of her craft which she had left behind there. Once she had found a bit of charcoal and an unused canvas, and, with fingers that almost trembled with eagerness, had begun sketching out the rough idea for a picture which had flashed into her mind. Then, feeling as though she were guilty of treason, she had smudged it out with her hand—and a few hot, blistering tears—and hastily quitted the studio.

She was thinking of this now, of what it would mean to her if she might only go and lose herself once more in the thrill of creative work—forget for a few hours each day the dull ache which lay deep underneath all her outward show of good spirits. And again unbidden tears welled to her eyes. But she had given Straton her promise, and no matter how much it cost her, she would never ask him to release her from it.

"Never!"

Unconsciously she spoke aloud, the word escaping her with a bitter emphasis.

"Are you taking a solemn vow, may I ask?" inquired a cheerful voice behind her. "Or is this communing with yourself merely a symptom of incipient insanity?"

Jill brushed her hand quickly across her face and twisted round in the hammock to find Garry standing just behind her.

"Oh, is that you, Garry? I think I'm pleased to see you," she said, conjuring up a smile of welcome.

"That's good," he replied, coming round to the other side of the hammock. "Because I'm quite sure I'm pleased to see you."

He lifted her hand and kissed it. Then, still retaining it in his clasp, he regarded her critically. She moved restlessly under his gaze, conscious of her recent tears.

"Why are you staring?" she asked, withdrawing her hand abruptly. "Have I got a smut on my nose?"

"Nothing that can be so simply dealt with. If you had, I should merely tell you to shut your eyes while I blew it off." He paused, then added significantly: "But it's too late now to tell you to shut your eyes; they're wide open."

The colour in her face deepened.

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Don't you?" Garry sat down cross-legged on the grass beside her and continued: "Then I'll explain——"

"No, no, don't." She broke in hastily, warned by something, some queer vibrant quality in his voice. "I don't want to hear."

He smiled ironically.

"Still bent on keeping your eyes shut to facts? Oh,

Jill, you silly dear, how long do you think you can go on pretending? You may deceive the outside world—I'll grant that you and Quayne behave beautifully to each other in public—but you're not deceiving yourself any longer. Nor me."

"You?"

"Yes. You can't deceive anyone who loves you. And because I care, I know—I *know* you're not happy. I can feel it every time we're together."

Jill sat up suddenly in the hammock.

"Garry, you mustn't talk like that," she said quickly. "You've no right to."

"I should have no right to if you were happy," he returned. "But you're not. Deny it if you can." His eyes, all at once dangerously aglow, were riveted on her face.

"I—I do deny it," she said valiantly. "I'm—quite happy."

He shook his head.

"You're lying exceedingly well," he replied coolly. "But, all the same, it's not convincing."

"How dare you, Garry?" Jill sprang to her feet. "If you only came over here to—talk absurdly, like this, you'd better go back to Lorne." She turned as though to leave him.

But he was on his feet almost as quickly as she, his hand closing suddenly round her arm.

"I didn't come over for that. I came over just in the ordinary way, and then your face, all wistful and sad—you'd been crying, Jill—made me speak. . . . Good God!" he went on vehemently. "Do you think a man can stand by, day after day, week after week, and see the

woman he cares for being made utterly miserable by another man—and say nothing?"

"Oh, stop—stop!" She strove to free herself from his hold, but his hand only tightened its grasp, and his other arm went round her, drawing her close against him.

"No, I won't stop! Jill, little darling Jill, I can't stand life without you any longer. I'd—I swear I'd try to—if you were happy. But you're not! Quayne will never make you happy. Let me try—come away with me——"

"Are you *mad?*" With a violent effort Jill tore herself out of his arms and stood confronting him—a slender, quivering figure with white face and eyes of horrified reproach. "Oh, Garry, I thought you were my friend—you've always been so decent . . . when I was lonely. . . . We've been such pals——"

"I'm the man who loves you," he retorted grimly. "And I'm tired of being decent . . . and filling in the gaps. If Quayne had made you happy, I'd have gone on—only there'd have been no gaps to fill, then. A woman isn't 'lonely' when she's happy. Jill——"

"Hush!" She lifted her hand and something in the gesture—something disarming and appealing—checked him. "It's quite true what you say—I *am* lonely, and I'm not happy. But it wouldn't make me happier if I did what you ask me to. Straton and I made a mistake." Her voice shook a little, then by an effort she steadied it. "I know that, now. But, even if I loved you, Garry, I wouldn't go with you. One doesn't find happiness—that way." She spoke very simply and quietly, and Lester, looking at her white young face with its boyishly direct gaze, knew that she had spoken her final word—that no argument or persuasion of his would move her.

She held out her hand with a rather tremulous smile.

"Let's forget this afternoon, Garry," she said. "And give me back—my pal."

He took the hand she held out and looked down at her with an odd expression in his dark eyes.

"You've won," he answered, "this time. But——"

She shook her head.

"We won't have any 'buts,' please," she said, purposely speaking in a lighter tone. Then, with the deliberate intention of restoring things to an everyday footing once more, she went on: "Suppose you stay and have tea with me? We can have it brought out here."

Garry acquiesced with a quick glance of admiration. No one could ever say that Jill didn't play the game. She had taken the only possible way of effectually blotting out of their minds the significance of the afternoon's occurrence, allowing no time for recollection on either side to raise a barrier between them.

And so it came about that Quayne, returning late in the afternoon from Exeter, where he had had some legal business to transact, found Garry and Jill having tea together under the oak tree, apparently on their usual good terms with each other. As he passed them he vouchsafed a cool nod in Lester's direction and, without a word to Jill, continued his way up to the house. She flushed a little; this was the first time her husband had ever slighted her in front of anyone. Rushing into conversation, she prevented Garry from uttering the scathing comment which she knew to be on the tip of his tongue, but she herself was secretly burning with anger when, half an hour later, Lester having taken his departure, she made her own way slowly back to the house.

She and Straton might have chosen to live more or less as strangers, but it had been understood that they

should appear, at least in public, as though there were no differences between them. And now he had practically broken that compact, and Jill felt as if the gulf betwixt them, already broad enough, had suddenly widened immeasurably. Apparently he no longer cared enough even to shelter her woman's pride—to conceal the state of things from other people.

Had she only held the key to the enigma of Straton's behaviour, she might have felt very differently. Coming out of the station on his return from Exeter, he had chanced to encounter Iris Lethbridge, and their road lying in the same direction for a short distance they had perforce walked on together. Whatever had lain between these two in the past they had long since learned to meet and talk as ordinary acquaintances, and the conversation had proceeded along the most commonplace channels. And then, all at once, out of the commonplace, had sprung a single sentence that was like the keen thrust of a rapier. Commenting on the fact that Quayne had been away for the day, Iris had remarked—apparently without *arrière-pensée,* if one could judge by her expression —that "it was nice for Jill to have her old friend, Garry Lester, in the neighbourhood." Adding lightly: "You're always so preoccupied with affairs of state, aren't you? Besides, it's only natural they should like to be together, after all. They're both so young."

And Quayne had gone home, inwardly cursing his thirty-seven years, to find Garry and Jill, to all outward seeming completely absorbed in one another, having tea together in the garden. It had been rather more than even his iron control, frayed a little with the complicated legal business he had been dealing with all day, could stand.

But of all this Jill was naturally in ignorance, and so one more brick was added to the wall of misunderstanding which was gradually rising higher and higher between husband and wife. It would be only one of the hardest blows Fate can deliver that could ever now destroy it.

CHAPTER VII

A PICNIC FOR TWO

WELL, good-bye, my dear. Tell Straton I shall be seriously offended with him if he doesn't come to see me soon." As she spoke, Lady Susan bent forward and embraced Jill warmly. The latter had been lunching at Lorne and was about to start for home, whither Garry had expressed his intention of escorting her. He was waiting for her now, while she exchanged last words with Lady Susan and Hazel, endeavouring meanwhile to suppress the enthusiasm of the Tribes of Israel, who were barking themselves hoarse at the prospect of a walk.

"I'll tell him," said Jill, replying to Lady Susan. "But just now he is in Exeter a great deal. There's a lot of legal business to be seen to in connection with some cousin's estate, and Straton is one of the trustees. I really see very little of him myself."

It was very naturally spoken—just what any wife might have said of any husband—yet to Lady Susan's quick ears there was the faintest note of artificiality, scarcely perceptible, in the little speech. Her keen dark eyes ran swiftly over the girl's face, noting a certain fine-drawn look about the eyes and mouth, but she made no comment at the moment. It was only after Jill and Garry had set off for Quayling, with half a dozen of the Tribes circling excitedly round them as they walked

briskly down the drive, that she slipped her arm into Hazel's and said abruptly:

"I'm not quite satisfied, my dear."

Hazel's soft brown eyes regarded her questioningly.

"About what, dearest lady?" she said.

Lady Susan vouchsafed no answer until they had regained the terrace where they had all been having coffee prior to Jill's departure. Sir Philip was still there, dozing in his chair, while Brett was occupied in extracting a thorn from the foot of a fox-terrier pup who sprawled across his knee in an attitude of complete and adoring self-abasement.

"I'm not satisfied about Jill," said Lady Susan contemplatively. "All's not quite well with her world."

There was a little pause, then Hazel answered simply: "No."

Lady Susan flashed round on her.

"You know, then!" she asserted. "She's told you?"

"Oh, no, no, no!" Hazel hastily declaimed any definite knowledge. "Jill's said nothing at all to me. But I know *her*—and I can feel in a moment whether she's happy or not."

Brett, having extracted the thorn to his and the puppy's mutual satisfaction, looked up with a grin.

"My revered aunt, do you imagine that if Jill's home-life were entirely composed of a pleasing combination of rack and thumbscrew she would ever volunteer the fact?" he inquired placidly. "If I know Jill, it would have to be very special circumstances that would get the truth—that particular kind of truth—out of her. She's a game little devil and she's got the pride of Lucifer."

His aunt regarded him with a certain unwonted modicum of respect.

"So you don't think she's happy, either, Brett?" she said swiftly.

"I'm quite sure she's not."

Lady Susan exploded.

"Then why in the name of goodness haven't you said anything before?" she demanded wrathfully, embracing both Brett and Hazel in her arraignment. "You've both been seeing her quite often all this last year—often enough, anyway, to be able to form some opinion—while I never set eyes on the child. And it doesn't take me more than a few glimpses of her to detect that something's radically wrong."

"Of course something's wrong, my dear aunt," agreed Brett temperately. "But it's no use 'saying anything.' If, for instance, I happen to take up wife-beating as a hobby after Hazel and I are married, it wouldn't be any use your *saying* anything."

"I shouldn't stop at that," retorted Lady Susan grimly. "I should break your stick over your own back."

"Would you?" Brett surveyed her thoughtfully for a moment before he pursued quietly: "Then stop Quayne from writing any more books and plays. That's your equivalent."

Lady Susan nodded. Inwardly she was surprised that Brett should have diagnosed the situation so accurately; she had not given him credit for so much intuition. She reflected that being in love widens the viewpoint of some men, just as it narrows that of others.

"Yes," she said slowly. "I think you're right, Brett. I told Straton when he married her that he was making a big mistake if he took Jill away from her work. But of course he thought he knew best"—irritably. "You men will never take a woman's advice until it's too late."

"I think——" began Hazel, then stopped abruptly.

"Yes. You think? What is it, Hazel?" questioned Lady Susan with almost pathetic eagerness. "Your brown eyes look so wise, child—what is it you think?"

"Why, I don't believe it's *only* because she'd had to give up painting that Jill isn't happy. I talked that over with her once before she was married, and I think—then—she was so fond of Straton that it simply didn't count. Things don't, you know"—flushing a little as she met Brett's eyes, curiously kind and understanding—"if you care very much for anyone."

"Then why—why have matters gone wrong now?" asked Lady Susan.

"Jill's so much alone, you see," answered Hazel hesitatingly. "She's had so little to—to make up for what she's lost."

"Oh, damn!" said Lady Susan with conviction. "Damn! And that's what comes of meddling! I feel as if *I'd* done it—spoilt Jill's life. I helped things on, you know"—penitently—"I know I did."

"We know you did," replied Brett, wagging a mocking forefinger at her. "When will you learn, my beloved aunt, that the path of the matchmaker is strewn with stones for other people to cut their feet on?"

Lady Susan sprang up restlessly.

"I'm going for a walk," she said. "I'm going to think what can be done. Something must be done—if I rip my portrait to pieces and tell Straton he's got to let Jill paint it all over again! That might at least start things moving in a new direction." And with that she whistled up such of the Tribes as were within call, grabbed her walking-stick, and strode off across the fields.

Meanwhile, when Garry and Jill reached Quayling it

was to find it, as usual, given over to the sole care of the Braytons.

"Straton has had to go into Exeter again," volunteered Jill. "This trustee business takes him up there nearly every day. Stay and have tea, Garry—I hate being alone." She did not add that she dreaded equally being alone with her husband, should he chance to return early.

"Of course I'll stay. I told you once before—in London—that it was entirely unnecessary for you ever to be alone. By the way, I was going to suggest that you and I might do a little trip on the Moor one day—you know, a picnic for two, with tea at an inn, or cottage, whichever we came across, and home in time for dinner. Are you game?"

Jill hesitated The last trip she and Garry had taken together had been the ill-fated one up the river which had led to that terribly far-reaching quarrel with her husband. It was not a pleasant memory. Beyond that, she felt a little afraid of Garry himself. Would his self-control outlast a whole day passed alone with her? More than all else she wanted to avoid another such scene as had taken place in the garden. A repetition of it must lead to an end of their friendship, and that friendship meant so much to her now that other things had failed.

"Come on, Jill, say you'll go," persuaded Garry, seeing her hesitation. "The car's simply eating its head off in the garage. It'll do you no end of good to come for a breather on the Moor."

Still she hesitated.

"I don't know what to say, Garry," she replied uncertainly.

"Say 'yes,'" he pleaded. "Unless"—with a sudden mocking challenge in his voice—"you're afraid to trust

yourself with me. . . . If so, of course, there's nothing more to be said."

The mockery had gone out of his voice with that last sentence, and in its place was an almost boyish note of appeal. Jill's heart softened instantly. This was the old Garry—Garry the good comrade and pal. She thought she understood him; this was his way of asking her to trust him again, to forgive what happened in the garden that day he had found her there in the hammock. Impulsively she stretched out her hand and he took it in his, holding it gently, almost questioningly.

"Of course I trust you," she said.

"Then you'll come?" His eyes, curiously vital and alight, searched her face. "To-morrow?"

She bent her head.

"Yes, I'll come," she said.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LONELY INN

JILL drew a long breath of satisfaction. A sun-baked moor, the dancing haze of heat sparkling and shimmering in front of her eyes, pungently sweet scent of gorse in her nostrils, and her whole being momentarily saturated with that sense of freedom which is born of open spaces.

"This is rather heavenly, Garry," she said, sinking down luxuriously on to the short, cushiony turf.

They had left the car by the roadside, within sight, and had found a grassy hollow, sheltered by clumps of gorse and heather, where they proposed lunching. Lester looked up from his occupation of delving into the depths of the hamper of good things provided for the occasion by Mrs. Brayton.

"It's none so dusty, is it?" he agreed. For a moment his eyes swept the rolling moorland appreciatively. Then he bent again over the hamper. "*Foie gras* sandwiches, lobster mayonnaise, chicken—I hope you're hungry. Jill?"

She laughed and nodded.

"I didn't know it till you mentioned the menu. Now I'm beginning to realise that I am."

"*And* a bottle of champagne," announced Garry, gleefully waving the gold-foiled bottle aloft. "Mrs. Brayton is evidently qualifying for early canonisation."

"I suspect Brayton is the power behind the throne," said Jill. "He's probably observed your weakness for the good things of life, Garry."

"I'm not ashamed of it," he protested stoutly. "After all, one can only live once. Why not enjoy all there is to enjoy, from *foie gras* upwards?"

"Most material minded person!" mocked Jill. "However, go ahead. You'll probably be punished in your old age by liberal doses of gout."

Lester, having attended to her needs, attacked the lobster valiantly.

"Well, then, I'll take my gruel—in both senses"—with a smile—"without grumbling, when the time comes. . . . Give me what I want in this world," he added significantly, "and if there's the devil to pay afterwards —well, I'll pay."

Jill felt suddenly as though a cloud had passed across the sun. Up till now she had been enjoying every minute of the "picnic for two"—the rush of the car along the broad white ribbon of road which crossed the Moor, the cool, clean air blowing against her cheeks, the consciousness of relief from the strained atmosphere of Quayling—a pervasive atmosphere which even Straton's daily absences in Exeter somehow failed to dispel. Moreover, Garry had been more like his old self—the jolly comrade of her happy, hard-working studio days—than she had known him for months past. The combination of these circumstances had given her a sense of lightheartedness to which she had long been a stranger. For a short time she had been able to forget her burden. And now these few words of Garry's—given significance by some odd twist of intonation—had reminded her of everything that she would so gladly have kept mentally at

bay a little longer, had even brought back, like a shadow, her earlier distrust of him. With an effort she gave him back some lightly uttered reply, deflecting the conversation into another channel, and after a time the shadow which seemed to have fallen across the day faded away again.

When lunch was over they lounged peacefully on the turf, smoking and talking, and presently Garry rolled up one of the rugs to make a pillow for Jill's head and, pleasantly tired with the strong moorland air, she fell asleep. She woke to find him shaking her gently by the shoulder.

"We ought to be going now," he said as she sat up, amazed to find how long she had been asleep, "if we are to get to the little inn I have in mind in time for tea. It'll be rather a late tea, anyway, I'm afraid," he added, glancing at his watch.

Jill sprang to her feet.

"Why on earth did you let me sleep so long?" she said.

A brief smile flitted across his face.

"Because there's no particular hurry," he replied. "No hurry at all, in fact."

"Do you think we'd better risk going on to this place for tea?" she asked a little dubiously. "You know I must be back in good time for dinner."

"I know. You shan't be late for your dinner." Again that brief smile, faintly enigmatic.

"Promise?"

He nodded.

"Promise. I'll go and start the car up at once."

A few minutes later they were once more running smoothly along, farther and farther from Doon St. Frances. Mile after mile sped by, and gradually, it seemed to Jill, they were approaching a wilder part of the Moor.

They had branched off from the road by which they had hitherto travelled, and it was obvious from its condition that the one on to which they had turned was little used by tourists or others.

"Where are you taking me to?" she asked at last. "This road doesn't look as if it was used much."

"Nor is it. Only the initiated know that from the tor just beyond my little inn—Hawk's Inn, it's called—you can get one of the rarest views on Dartmoor. But it's so much off the main route and the road is so bad that the ordinary tourist and sightseer leaves it severely alone."

"I should think so," gasped Jill, as the car lurched in and out of a deep-cut wheel-track. "It can't be very good for the tyres," she added with some concern.

"No. However, if they suffer, it's in a good cause."

Presently the road broadened out a trifle, and finally, as they rounded a corner, the inn itself came into view. It was a low, rambling building which looked as if originally two or three adjoining cottages had been knocked into one to make it. A wide veranda had been added in front, with stoutly built wings which completely excluded the bleak moorland winds from either side, and here the presence of a swinging signboard bearing the brief legend, "LUNCHES AND TEAS," and of several small wooden tables and chairs, told their own tale. A stone wall, with a roughly made gate at one corner, encircled the wind-bitten garden which surrounded the inn.

Drawn up just outside was a big touring car, and exactly as Garry and Jill descended from their two-seater, a group of people, laughing and chattering, emerged from the gateway and made their way toward the stationary car. As they passed, one of the women, fur-coated and

swathed in a dark-blue motor-veil which almost entirely disguised her features, halted uncertainly, glanced curiously from Jill to her companion, then, with a slight bow which included them both, hurried on in the wake of the rest of the party.

Jill flushed suddenly as she recognised Iris Lethbridge in the woman who had bowed. Somehow she would rather it had been anyone else who had chanced to find her alone with Garry in this outlying part of the Moor. Why, she reflected irritably, as she watched the big car travelling slowly and carefully down the rough incline which led away from the inn, should some of the Farnby Chace house-party have elected to motor out in this direction on this particular day?

"View first and tea after? Or tea first and view after?" asked Lester, holding the gate open for her to pass in. He made no comment on the *rencontre* with Iris, but his brow had darkened a little and there was a curious, speculative look in his eyes.

"Oh, view first," declared Jill hastily. "And we mustn't stay too long, or I shall be late home, Garry." She was beginning to wish they had not made quite so long a trip. There was something forbidding about the lonely inn, set so far from any other human habitation. "Don't you think, perhaps, we had better give up the idea of climbing the tor, and just have tea here and then motor straight home?"

"I certainly do not," replied Garry. "I've not brought you all this way merely for the pleasure of drinking tea out of thick cups and saucers in a wooden shanty. It won't take us long"—persuasively—"and I'll tell them to have tea waiting for us when we get back."

Finally Jill nodded assent, and they set off on foot in

the direction of the tor. Twenty minutes' brisk walking brought them to its foot, but the climb itself occupied considerably longer, and its difficulties kept Jill, at least, from observing that a change was taking place in the aspect of the weather. A general greyness had been spreading slowly over the sky for some time past, and by the time they reached the summit of the tor it was to find that the distant view was almost entirely obscured. Heavy clouds were banking up all round, and they had already broken over the Moor some few miles away, blotting out everything in a slanting drive of rain.

"We'd better bolt back to the inn," said Garry, as a few sprinkling drops fell warningly. "If I'm not much mistaken we're in for a regular downpour."

Accordingly, they hurried down the tor-side as quickly as the rough ground permitted, but long before they had accomplished the descent the rain was coming down in good earnest, driven by a rising gale of wind, and by the time they regained the shelter of the inn, Jill's thin summer frock was wet through.

"You'll have to get the landlady to dry it for you," said Garry, regarding her drenched little figure with commiseration.

"I'm afraid I shall," she assented. Adding with an anxious note in her voice: "It is a nuisance; it will make us so late in getting back."

"It's no use worrying," counselled Garry. "We can't start back in this deluge, so we may as well make the best of it. Meanwhile, I'll fetch your coat from the car —they've shoved it into a shed out of the rain. You'll have to wear that"—with a smile—"while your frock is dried."

For the moment there seemed nothing for it but to

acquiesce. As Garry truly said, it was useless to think of making a start in such a blinding storm. Apart from the fact that the hood of the little two-seater only afforded a very insufficient protection, it would have been almost impossible to see to drive through such a deluge of furious, beating rain. But later on, once more re-clad in a dry albeit somewhat crumpled frock, and with tea long since disposed of, Jill stood at the window drumming with nervous fingers on the pane, thoroughly on edge to get back home.

"What are we to do, Garry?" she demanded. "We can't stay here indefinitely."

He rose from his seat by the inn parlour fire and came to her side.

"I think there's only one thing to do," he said. "And that is to ask them to give us some dinner here—they're sure to be able to put us up some kind of meal, although it may not be quite up to the level of Mrs. Brayton's cooking."

"Dine here?" exclaimed Jill, aghast. "But that means we shouldn't get home till ten or eleven to-night."

"We certainly shouldn't—if we got home then," replied Garry.

"Well—but—oh! It's impossible!"

He pointed outside, where the rain still poured down pitilessly.

"Do you want to get wet through?" he asked. "Be sensible, Jill. The harder it rains now, the sooner it will be over. It's a choice between probably catching your death of cold—or waiting."

"Straton——" began Jill hesitatingly.

"Isn't a fool," put in Garry quickly. "He knows what driving across the Moor in this downpour would mean.

Surely"—satirically—"he would accept your explanation——"

"Of course he would!" Jill's pride was up in arms at once. A faint flush tinged her cheeks. "Only—naturally—he'll be anxious when we don't turn up in time for dinner. That's all I'm thinking of."

"Then if that's all, I shouldn't worry about it. Let me order something to eat. Shall I?"

Reluctantly she consented. She felt worried and anxious, but in the face of this hurricane of rain and wind it seemed the only thing to be done. Dinner, when it came, was not a particularly appetising meal. That, however, affected her but little. She was far too worried to feel hungry, and she waved the landlady's apologies away with a rather pale little smile. Gradually, as the meal progressed, she grew more and more silent, while Garry, too, seemed absorbed in his own thoughts and made no effort to cheer matters up.

It was not until they had reached the coffee and cigarette stage of the proceedings that there was any diminution in the beating of the rain against the windowpanes, and then, just as suddenly as it had come on, the storm seemed to cease. Jill sprang up and, throwing open the doors of the French window, peered out. The clouds were scudding away northward, and a pale, watery-looking moon gleamed down on the drenched moorland. She turned back quickly into the room.

"Garry, it's stopped raining!" She glanced down at her watch and gave an exclamation of dismay. "Do go and start the engine at once," she went on a trifle breathlessly. "It's even later than I thought, and you simply *must* get me back before midnight."

But Lester made no movement to obey. Instead, he

sat looking at her with a curious expression in his eyes, rather as though he were mentally balancing up certain possibilities. Then he shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said slowly, "but I can't get you back at all to-night. There's no petrol."

"No petrol?" she exclaimed incredulously. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. We've got about enough petrol to run us two or three miles. I didn't tell you before, because——"

"Because?" repeated Jill in a queer, strained voice. Fear—a nameless, terrible fear that she dared not put into words—was beating up all around her. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because," said Garry quietly, "because I didn't want you to know."

"Do you mean—that *you* knew—all the time?"

He nodded.

"Yes. I only brought enough petrol to get us here—and no more." He spoke quite quietly, with a certain new significance, and to Jill's eyes, desperately searching for some explanation of the inexplicable, even his face seemed to have altered—to have grown older-looking, stern with the definiteness of resolve, all the boyishness gone out of it.

"Will you"—she tried to keep her head and speak composedly—"will you tell me what you mean—explain?"

Garry stood up.

"Yes, I'll explain. Do you remember"—his eyes met and held her own—"do you remember I once told you that if I couldn't get you by fair means I would by foul? Well, that's the meaning of it. I want you, and I'm going to take you."

CHAPTER IX

THE LAST LINK BROKEN

IN the heavy silence which followed Garry's last speech it seemed to Jill as though his figure towered above her in the candle-lit dusk of the inn parlour. She shrank back.

"Garry, you must be mad—mad!" she exclaimed, her breath coming unevenly. "I've told you even if I cared for you—I would never do—that. Did you suppose you could force me to—by a trick like this?"

"Yes, I did suppose so."

"Then you were never more mistaken. I'm going straight to the landlord to ask him to give me some petrol."

Lester stood aside.

"Do, by all means. Only he hasn't any. He never keeps it; I knew that. He'd have no use for it in this benighted spot."

"I don't believe it!" she returned. Brushing impetuously past him, she disappeared into the gloomy passage which lead to the kitchen, only to return in a few minutes with her disappointment written on her features.

"Well, are you convinced?" he asked. There was something almost wickedly triumphant in his face. This was a Garry whom she had only sometimes dimly visioned when he had been in one of his worst moods—Garry with all that was good and lovable in him at a discount

and all that was arrogantly evil and selfish in the ascendant.

"Yes, I am convinced," she said contemptuously. "Convinced that I never made a greater mistake than when I believed you to be a friend."

"Yes," he admitted gravely. "I'm not your friend. I've told you so. I'm your lover, not your friend. Jill, give in and own you're beaten. Be sensible and realise it. You've no choice now. You can't get home to-night. You've got to stay here—with me. And afterwards—well, you'll find Quayne won't be exactly prepared to take you back——"

But he never finished that sentence. Jill's slender hand suddenly dealt him a stinging blow across the mouth. For a moment a very devil of rage seemed to blaze out of his eyes at her. Then it died down as quickly as it had flared up, and Garry's charming smile flashed out. He lifted the hand which had struck him and kissed it lightly, then, with a swift movement, drew her into his arms.

"You silly darling!" he said, his voice suddenly very tender. "Oh, Jill, I know just how you feel. Trapped. But I had to trap you, sweetest. There was no other way of getting you. You were out of my reach. . . . Jill, I'm not all bad. I gave Quayne a year in which to make good—in which to prove that he could make you happy. And he didn't do it. If you'd been happy, I'd have gone away again and left you to it. . . . You tried to pretend you were at first. But you weren't. And the other day you admitted it. Since then I've thought of nothing else—nothing but how to take you away from him and teach you what love means."

With a sudden, unexpected twist of her lithe body Jill freed herself from his grasp.

"*You* teach me what love means?" she flung back at him. "Why, you don't know the very first meaning of it, if you call it love—to do what you've done to-day."

"I *had* to do it," he persisted doggedly. "You would never have left Quayne of your own free will. Your"—he paused, then pursued with a scornful inflection in his voice—"your sense of duty is too strong."

She seemed not to hear the taunt.

"I wonder what you'd have done if the rain hadn't happened to detain us," she said, with a kind of detached curiosity.

"You may be sure I should have invented some excuse to keep you here—until it was too late for you to go back. But, as it was, the gods fought on my side."

"And do you imagine I'm going to stay here—now—with you?"

"I imagine you've no choice"—politely.

"Then you're very much mistaken. I'm going back home, back to Quayling, if I walk every step of the way."

"At this time of night?"

"Certainly. I'd rather tramp the Moor all night than stay here with you." As she spoke, she turned away as though to put her words into immediate action.

If she was afraid she showed no sign of it, and something in her cool defiance, in the quiet disdain with which she turned to leave him roused to sudden flame the passion which he had been holding under restraint. In two strides he had overtaken her and caught her in his arms. She struggled, but all her woman's strength was nothing against his.

"Don't struggle," he said. "It's useless. Give in, Jill,

give in, and I swear you shall never repent it as long as you live."

But she still fought him, twisting this way and that.

"I won't," she returned, between her teeth. "Let go of me, Garry—do you hear? You must be utterly mad!"

"Mad?" he repeated unsteadily. "Yes, I think I am —mad for you." For an instant she met his eyes, and the hot vehemence of desire that blazed in them filled her with fear, sapping her strength. A moment later he had bent his face to hers and she felt his kisses crushing against her eyes and lips and throat—terrible, burning kisses that seemed to hurt something right down in the depths of her being, staining and searing it.

"Garry——" But he stifled the word with his passionate mouth on hers.

Suddenly, without warning, came the sound of imperious, striding footsteps crossing the wooden boards of the veranda. A man's figure paused for an instant at the open French window, bulking dark against the leaden sky, and instinctively Garry relaxed his hold of her. In that brief second between the loosening of his grip and what happened after she had just time to realise that the man standing on the threshold of the room was Straton. Then with a hoarse, wordless cry he leaped—straight at Garry. His clenched fist shot out, and Garry crashed backwards to the ground and lay still. . . .

In the utter silence that followed husband and wife stood facing one another across Lester's prostrate body. Jill's hand had flown to her mouth, checking the involuntary scream that had risen to her lips. Above it her eyes stared strickenly into Quayne's. His face was like a mask cut out of stone, grey, with the lips drawn back a little from the teeth. Only the deep-set eyes seemed to

live, and they blazed with a cold fury that was rather terrible. The silence seemed everlasting. At last Jill dropped her hand from her mouth and pointed with a shaking finger to where Lester lay.

"Is he dead? . . . Have you killed him?" she asked tonelessly.

For an instant Quayne's gaze quitted her face and swept the prone body at his feet.

"No," he replied briefly. He turned towards the window by which he had entered. "Come," he said. "Come with me."

Moving stiffly, as though she were in a dream, Jill followed him. As she stepped out on to the veranda she turned her head and looked back. The figure on the floor was moving, struggling slowly into a sitting position. Something that had seemed pressing down on her like a huge leaden weight lifted suddenly. Garry was alive, then—Straton hadn't killed him! A long breath of unutterable relief whispered sibilantly between her lips. She went on, out into the night in the wake of that tall, stern, figure moving ahead, to where the lights of a car gleamed like watching eyes.

"Get in." It was Quayne's voice once more, clipped and terse. He took his own place behind the wheel. The engine was still running, throbbing evenly in the stillness of the moorland night. Mechanically Jill stepped into the car.

Mile after mile they sped along, Quayne bent silently over the wheel, Jill leaning back with closed eyes, utterly spent and exhausted. Once only she opened her lips to speak.

"How did you know where I was?" she asked curiously.

"Iris told me."

So it was Iris . . . always Iris. She did not ask how or why Iris had told him. It didn't seem to matter much.

The long, silent drive was over. They were back at Quayling. A clock was striking twelve as they entered the house—a clock that chimed the quarters of each hour. By the time it had chimed the first quarter after midnight Jill realised that the end had come—the end of everything. She stood very still, her slight young figure drooping a little as though with fatigue, her face curiously pallid in the glare of the electric burners.

The storm of Straton's anger had swept over her as a storm sweeps over a garden, beating the slender, delicate heads of the flowers to earth, breaking and destroying all that had once held promise of beauty and fragrance. In the fury of rage which possessed him he had said many cruel things, many hard and bitter things, difficult to be borne—but they were all things she could forgive. And then, wrenched out of him by the blind, white-hot madness of the moment, came the unforgivable.

Slowly Jill's figure stiffened.

"Do you mean," she said in a still, cold voice—a little cold voice that pierced the silence which had followed like a spear of ice—"do you mean that that is what you seriously think—that it was all planned, that I *intended* going away with Garry?"

"What else? I'm not a fool. Nor are you, yet, knowing the man was in love with you, you go off to the most god-forsaken part of the Moor alone with him. And I find you there—in his arms. You're not proposing to tell me that it all happened accidentally, I suppose?"

Yes, she had been a fool. She realised that now. She had played with fire—and fire burns. Yet how innocently, on her part, had the day's happenings come about! And Straton couldn't or wouldn't understand. . . . Perhaps he didn't *want* to understand.

"No," she answered, still in that same chill, monotonous voice. "I'm not going to tell you that it happened accidentally. I'm not going to tell you anything. I imagine Iris has told you all that is necessary." She paused. Then, with a sudden impulsive gesture: "Do you remember," she said, "asking me once if I thought there was an uncounted third in every man's life?"

"Yes, I remember. But I'm not that sort of man, whatever you may choose to imagine. It was pure chance that Iris told me where you were. When you didn't come I phoned up Lorne. She happened to be dining there. I merely thought some accident had occurred—until I found you in Lester's arms."

Jill looked at him curiously.

"I wonder you considered it worth while to bring me home?" she said. "I should have thought you might have been glad to get rid of me. Our marriage has been rather a mistake, hasn't it?"

"It may have been. But my wife remains my wife," he answered grimly.

"Yes!" A sudden wave of anger shook the ice out of her voice. It was vibrant, now, vibrant with accusation. All the disappointment and bitterness and forced endurance of the months that were gone spilled over in a quick rush of words. "Yes, that is all you think of—'my' wife. Just because she is yours! That's all that matters to you—that she's *yours*—some sort of appurtenance to your life. Whether she's happy or not is of no par-

ticular importance. . . . Have you ever realised what our marriage has meant to me? You took me away from the work I loved—you didn't want 'your' wife to work!—and after the first few months you went back to your own work and became absorbed in it exactly as you were before you were married. While I—I had nothing. Only my friends. . . . I've stood it all. I've been utterly loyal and straight. No one knows how I've hated my life. Garry guessed it—I suppose, because he cares. And then you dare—you *dare* to think what you've thought to-night! Oh, I've finished, Straton—I've finished——"

He took a quick step towards her.

"Jill!"

There was a note of incredulity in his voice, of incredulity and of something else, too—a kind of desperate hope, almost terrible in its intensity. But she was too hurt, too stunned with pain, to hear it. With a swift, impetuous movement she turned and fled from the room.

. . . Once within the safe solitude of her own bedroom she sat down to think. She was surprised to find how collectedly she could muster her thoughts. She knew quite well what she was going to do—had known from the moment that Straton had let her see how utterly he misunderstood and misjudged the circumstances in which he had found her at Hawk's Inn. As far as she was concerned that had ended everything—cut the only thread which might still have drawn them together. There had been one moment during that brief, dreadful scene in the inn parlour when she had felt her love rush out towards Straton in an overwhelming tide—the moment when he had knocked Garry down. To the primitive which lay deep within her, which lies deep within

every woman—no matter how thick the crust with which civilisation may have overlaid it—that was natural, the splendid, instinctive impulse of a man to hold and shield his own from harm. If Straton had only known, if his trust in her had only risen above the evidence of his senses, denied disloyalty in her, he could in that moment have healed every hurt that had driven them apart. But he had learned distrust of women in the bitter school of experience, and the ingrained suspicion of years leaped into life again at the sight of Jill in Lester's arms. His big moment came and he failed it.

But of all this, of all that lay in the past which had contributed to his failure, Jill was too passionately hurt and disillusioned to heed. There was only one thing left to her—to go away. Straton had never understood her, never even tried to understand, and now he had splintered the last link—the link of loyalty and trust—which had bound her to him. It would be better to go away—to live alone rather than endure their life together any longer.

Very methodically she began moving about her room, opening and shutting drawers, quietly, so as not to disturb anyone, selecting this, rejecting that. Presently, when a small heap of filmy apparel lay on the bed, she dragged out a suit-case from a closet adjoining her bedroom and proceeded to pack it carefully with the necessaries she would require for a few days. The remainder of her clothes could be sent on to her afterwards—to the flat at Chelsea. That was where she would go, back to the flat—it was empty now save for old Madelon. She would go back to Madelon who loved her, to Madelon to whose simple, trustful devotion nothing she could say or do, no mistakes she might ever make, would matter in

the least. There was a train she could catch to Exeter—the milk-train which left Doon St. Frances, laden with tall, shining cans of milk, at five o'clock in the morning, and from Exeter she could take another train on to London. She closed the suit-case with a snap and turned the key in the lock. Then she glanced round the room. There was only one thing still left to do, and that was to write to her husband. It savoured a little of the melodramatic, she thought, but still, she must write to him, so that he should understand that she had really left him. She pulled a block of notepaper towards her, and began to write.

"I'm going away, Straton," she wrote. *"After tonight nothing could ever be the same again. I could never forget, and you would never* really *believe. You see, you've never understood, and somehow I can't explain. Don't ask me to come back. I don't think you will, because you don't really want me, although I know for a little while you thought you did. It's just been a mistake. I shall go back to the flat and take up painting again. Love isn't the only thing in the world, after all—you've taught me that.*

Jill."

She tore the sheet from the block, folded it and, slipping it into an envelope, addressed it to Quayne. Presently, suit-case in hand, she stole downstairs and into his study. The house was very quiet. By some oversight the blinds had not been drawn in the study and the pale dawnlight came creeping pallidly in through the window. On the desk lay some closely written manuscript, with an old motoring glove carelessly tossed down beside it. As Jill propped her letter up against the brass-framed

calendar, her eyes fell on the glove, creased with the imprint of Straton's hand. With a sudden impulsive gesture she picked it up and pressed it passionately against her soft young lips. It smelt faintly of tobacco. Then she turned and made her way out of the house.

Half an hour later the milk-train jolted its way slowly out of the station.

CHAPTER X

AWAKENING

"TO-MORROW morning, then, at the same time. You've been awfully good to me, Mrs. Quayne. Good-bye."

Jill closed the flat door behind the sitter who had been posing for her all morning and returned thoughtfully to the studio, halting in front of the easel and regarding with curious, appraising eyes the portrait it held which was now almost completed. It was that of a young girl, hardly out of her teens, who was shortly to be married to a man with whom she was very much in love and who was equally in love with her. The face, although it boasted little more than the prettiness of youth, yet arrested the attention. There was a certain radiance in its expression—a radiance born of some serene inner glow of happiness. Mouth and eyes held a little mystic smile —touching in its young, wise tenderness. "I know," it seemed to say, "I know that love is the most wonderful thing in the whole world."

To-day, for the first time the girl had talked to Jill of the man she loved, at first a little shyly and tentatively, but gradually, sensing the sympathy of the other woman, with increasing confidence, until at last Jill knew the whole story of when and how they had first met, of the splendid lover he was, and had even learned some of the sweet, veiled visions of a future, dim and glorious,

which lay tremulously hidden in the young girlish heart.

To-day! And it was exactly six months ago to-day that Jill had stolen away in the pale light of the dawning and left her husband for ever. The months which followed had been very terrible ones, hard to be lived, and it was only a dogged pride which had carried her through them. That, and her work—work, which is the only panacea for pain.

In the first intolerant anger which his distrust of her had called into bitter being it had not seemed difficult to contemplate life apart from Straton. They had seen so little of one another latterly, lived so much as strangers to each other in their own house, that it did not seem as though to cut the frayed cord which still held them together would really make any great difference, except to give her freedom—freedom to live her own life as she willed, to return to the work which had once meant everything to her, above all, freedom from *pain*.

But when once she had closed the doors of Quayling definitely behind her, and life, utterly and absolutely apart from Straton, had to be faced, Jill learned that the one thing she had not gained was freedom from pain. Love, hurt and insulted, still remains love, and the very pith and marrow of it is the desire for the loved one's presence. And there were times when the longing for Straton, for his actual physical presence, was almost more than she could bear.

She threw herself heart and soul into her work, but she soon realised that work is a poor substitute for love —that when once you have known the wonder of the one, the other is no more than a narcotic serving to dull the pain of separation.

She had never seen Straton since the day she had

quitted Quayling. Hazel's wedding had taken place in September from the Brabazons' house in Audley Square, and naturally, in the circumstances, they had invited Jill and omitted Straton from the list of guests. Lady Susan had explained matters to him with her usual ruthless frankness.

"Jill has a right to come—she's Hazel's greatest friend, so I'm bound to leave you out, Straton," she had told him brusquely, and he had agreed with a grave courtesy that had betrayed nothing at all of what he thought or felt.

Perhaps if Lady Susan could have risked inviting both the Quaynes a good deal of unhappiness might have been saved, as, during those first few weeks of unimagined pain and loneliness, Jill would have smothered her pride and gone back again to her husband, if he had only given the smallest sign that he wanted her, and together they might have built up a new life upon the ruins of the old.

For it had not taken her long to learn the lesson which the sudden breaking asunder of all links had held. She had thought that love was dead within her; she had found it would not die. And now six months had passed, and, during the whole of that time, neither by word nor sign had Quayne shown any need of her. Outwardly she had matched her indifference against his own. Everything was over and done with. The best thing in life was lost to her. She realised that. All that remained was to face the fact gamely, and carry on.

But in the process she had worn a little fine. Always built on racing lines, she was now almost too thin, and the angles of her face had become more sharply defined. Beneath the long, narrow black brows her eyes seemed to have grown preternaturally large, while faint purple

shadows lay frequently beneath them. She worked incessantly. Commissions for portraits poured in, as soon as it was known that she was painting again, and she was also at work upon two original pictures designed for exhibition in the Academy. She had decided that the portrait which was now nearing completion was the last upon which she would embark until these two pictures were finished. She was feeli' g the strain of the past six months more than she would admit. But old Madelon guessed. She came in now, padding in on her flat-heeled shoes, and stood quietly in the doorway until Jill, emerging with a start from the reverie into which she had fallen, perceived her there.

"Madame's lunch is ready," she volunteered. Then, coming forward a few steps: "Shall I serve it?"

Jill nodded.

"Yes, do. What do you think of Miss Templeton's portrait, Madelon?" she added, with a gesture towards the canvas facing them on the easel.

Madelon looked at it, at the pictured girlish face with its strange atmosphere of radiance, and then at the adored face beside her—a little bitter, a little weary, all the radiance that had once been there obscured—and all at once the lines round her kind old mouth puckered up and her brown-currant eyes swam in a sudden mist of tears.

"She looks—so happy," she said. "So happy, Madame Gille."

"Yes, I think she is happy. I hope she will always be happy. Some people are, you know, Madelon."

Jill spoke with a curious dry indifference, rather as if she were merely making a general statement of fact, and the arid quiet of her tone had its effect on Madelon's quickly roused emotion. The old woman winked back

her tears as though in obedience to some subconsciously felt mandate.

"Oui, madame," she agreed meekly. "And shall I serve madame's lunch?"

"Yes. I'll come at once."

Jill walked slowly into the dining-room, Omar following in stately fashion at her heels. Since the break between his wife and himself, Straton had given up the Gilsborough Mansions flat and to all intents and purposes buried himself in the country at Quayling, so that Omar had once more returned to his first home, where he had settled down again without any buttering of paws. Nor were his susceptibilities ever ruffled nowadays, as they were once wont to be, by the ubiquitous appearances of Garry Lester. The flat above was empty and tenantless, and Garry himself wandering in far places, at grips with his own soul at last. He had written to Jill once, craving her forgiveness.

> *"I'm going right away somewhere to fight my devils,"* [he had written]. *"If they win, I shall keep out of your life altogether. But if ever I find*—surely —*that I can be the pal you always wanted me to be, then I'll come back and ask for just my little place amongst your friends."*

Jill had barely finished lunch when there came a ring at the flat door and Lady Susan, on this occasion unaccompanied by any of the Tribes of Israel, made her appearance. Jill hailed her with delight.

"Darling Lady Susan, you've come just in time to 'coffee' with me," she exclaimed, hugging her warmly and leading the way into the studio. "I quite thought

you were still down at Lorne. When did you come up?"

"I came up this morning," replied Lady Susan, subsiding into the arm-chair Jill pulled forward towards the fire for her. "And I'm going back again to-morrow. Clothes," she added explanatorily. "One can't do without 'em, even in the depths of the country."

Jill tendered her cigarette-case and Lady Susan lit up, slowly and deliberately, meanwhile taking surreptitious stock of the girl's appearance. She had not seen her since just before Christmas, when she and Sir Philip had migrated to Devonshire, and she had noticed that even the last two months had added to the curiously controlled look of strain in the sharply angled face.

"You don't look well," she observed bluntly.

"Oh, I'm perfectly well," Jill assured her hastily. She poured out the coffee. "Two lumps, isn't it, for you? . . . I'm only working rather hard just now, you know," she added.

Lady Susan glanced across at the portrait on the easel.

"Humph! That's the Templeton child, isn't it? I wish"—abruptly—"*you* looked like that."

Jill flushed a little, but she did not affect to misunderstand her.

"That's not very likely, is it?" she said quietly. "Fay Templeton's at the beginning of things. I'm at the end."

"Are you so sure of that?" Lady Susan flashed at her. "We make big mistakes about that kind of thing occasionally. What has looked like an ending is sometimes only a better beginning."

"That may possibly apply to my work," replied Jill. "I'll agree with you as far as that's concerned."

"I wasn't limiting it to that." Lady Susan drank her coffee and set down her cup with a little determined click.

She had come to the Chelsea flat with a view to finding out something that she wanted to know, and she had no intention of going away unsatisfied. "Work isn't the only thing in life. . . . Jill"—her brusque voice suddenly softened and mellowed incredibly—"the Almighty isn't a one-idea'd person. Love's not enough and work's not enough to fill up life. You need both, and I guess the good Lord knew it when He created the two and hung the whole world on them. Why don't you and Straton make it up?"

The question was fired at her so abruptly that Jill was taken off her guard, and, before she knew it, she had answered out of the bitter fullness of her heart.

"He doesn't care any longer."

Lady Susan made no answer for a moment. Then, looking at her very steadily and directly, she said:

"You wouldn't say that if you could see him—as I have seen him. He's a different man."

"He's not ill?" asked Jill swiftly.

"Physically—no. In every other way—yes, Straton's a very sick man. Go back to him, Jill."

Jill shook her head.

"I can't," she said. "Listen, Lady Susan dear. I don't want ever to talk of this again, but I will just this once, because I want you to understand. And you don't." She paused.

Lady Susan puffed out a long thin stream of smoke into the air.

"Go ahead," she said succinctly.

"I've thought it all over," continued Jill. "Oh, you can guess that—you must know it. I left him on impulse—I'll grant that. But I've stayed away for the best reason in the world. I can't ever go back to him—be-

cause he doesn't want me. I think—I think he must have cared for Iris all the time. His love for her wasn't killed —as he thought. After all, love doesn't die," she added with a queer, crooked little smile that seemed to Lady Susan more sad than tears. "Don't you see?—what he felt for me was only a flash in the pan. He's not to blame. He—he just didn't know, didn't realise it."

And with that Lady Susan had to be content. But she had learned all she wanted to know—Jill still cared, and she left London feeling more cheerful than she had done for a long time. Hazel, who was in town for a few days with her husband, came to see her off at Paddington Station, wearing a quaint little air of matronly dignity and happiness that sat rather sweetly upon her and which rejoiced Lady Susan's heart.

"I'm going to meddle again, Hazel," she told her. "I can't ever keep my fingers out of other people's pies when I see them spoiling."

"Do you think it will do any good?" asked Hazel doubtfully.

"I don't know." Lady Susan sighed. "One never realises how little influence one has with one's friends until one comes up against something that really matters."

And she had fresh cause to realise it one day soon afterwards, when, having asked Quayne to lunch for the express purpose—and skilfully secured Sir Phillip's absence by creating some errand for him to fulfil in Exeter —she broached the subject so near to her heart.

"Straton, why don't you ask Jill to come back to you?" She opened fire abruptly. There were times when she believed that beating about the bush was fatal. As she spoke, she scanned Quayne's face narrowly, but his expression remained noncommittal. Only a sudden brief

glint in the deep-set eyes betrayed that the question had taken him unawares.

"Because—obviously—it wouldn't make for her happiness," he replied.

"I don't see the obviousness of it."

"Don't you? It's surely the natural deduction, seeing that she chose to leave me."

"And does her happiness matter—much—to you?" The kindness in her bright, dark eyes softened the edge of the searching question. He smiled faintly.

"It means as much as it ever did," he said.

Lady Susan sat up very suddenly in her chair.

"That's just it," she said vigorously. "How much did it ever mean? I've often wondered. Why, if her happiness meant anything to you, did you ask her to give up the one thing she loved—her painting—when you married her?"

"Perhaps I thought I could supply the deficiency. It seems"—rather hardly—"that I overrated my abilities."

"You didn't give up *your* work when you married—and rely on Jill's being able to 'supply the deficiency'!" snapped Lady Susan. "Why not?"

"That's rather a different proposition, isn't it? A man's the bread-winner."

"In your case the Lord's provided for you—without working. Your books merely mean rather thicker butter on your bread—that's all."

"Well"—Quayne spoke protestingly—"you wouldn't have a man idle about doing nothing, would you? He simply runs to seed."

"So does a woman," retorted Lady Susan. "Do you suppose dusting the china and going to theatres and dances are all a woman with brains asks of life?"

"A woman's place is——"

"In the home," chipped in Lady Susan smartly. "Don't talk such piffle, Straton. That idea went out with the Ark, when I expect Mrs. Noah got excessively bored with her 'place' there."

"Well, at least you'll admit that when there's a child——"

"There isn't in your case." Lady Susan had no intention of being skilfully lured into the by-ways of a theoretical discussion. "And even if there were, a baby isn't an earthquake, man! When you've got money to make things plain sailing, a husband and a baby aren't nearly enough to keep an intelligent woman fully occupied. Besides, there's a considerable monotony about it—men and babies require almost the same methods. I tell you straight, Straton, *you're* really responsible for the whole mess you two have made of your married life."

"I?" Quayne lifted coolly ironical brows. "You seem to forget Jill showed me very clearly that she preferred Lester——"

"Preferred fiddlesticks! You marry a woman like Jill, all fire and vitality, a woman endowed with a big gift, and then you cut her off from the work she's used to, and proceed to neglect her for your own blessed writing."

"Neglect her?" Quayne spoke slowly, a curious amazement in his tones. "She had everything a woman could want."

"In mere material things. Only, you see, man does not live by bread alone—and woman still less!"

"She never complained."

"Complained! Did you expect her to? Good heavens, man, you write books—books about women—and your feminine psychology is supposed to be good. Yet when

you've got a real live woman to deal with you understand her about as much as I understand higher mathematics! Oh, you men! Will you never understand a woman's pride? Do you suppose any woman is going to *tell* a man that he's neglecting her—or even hint at it? Of course not. She'll go off and play with the next man that comes along, that's all."

Quayne had risen and was pacing the room slowly backwards and forwards, his head bent, his chin thrust out. Lady Susan watched him in silence. Presently he halted beside her and stood looking down at her with a curious expression in his eyes.

"I seem to have made rather a hash of things, don't I?" he said at last. "I never meant to."

There was something oddly boyish and appealing about the brief speech. In that moment Quayne was no longer the famous novelist and playwright. The "little boy" in him was uppermost—the "little boy" which lurks in every grown man and makes its claim upon the eternal mother in every woman. Lady Susan sensed it, and her big, kind heart rushed out to him in an imperative longing to console and help.

"But you can put things right, Straton," she urged eagerly. "Begin again. Oh, my dear, do begin again. Go and ask Jill to come back to you."

He shook his head.

"No," he said quietly, and there was a note of dogged resolution in his voice. "I shall never do that. She wasn't happy with me. I failed her. Some day she'll find happiness in her work—and in the success which it will bring her."

CHAPTER XI

THE RED ROOF OF QUAYLING

THE May sunlight came glinting in through the little diamond panes of the leaded windows, throwing a dappled pattern of quivering light across the darkness of the polished floor almost to old Lady Farnby's feet. She was sitting in a tall, high-backed chair in the morning-room at the Chace and staring discontentedly out from under her shrivelled eyelids at her great-niece.

"For a beautiful woman—and I'll grant you that," she remarked in an acid tones that took all grace from the admission, "you've been about as unsuccessful as anyone could possibly be. With half your looks, any other woman would have married the biggest rent-roll in the kingdom."

"I don't think I particularly want to marry—a rent-roll," replied Iris coolly.

"Oh, there's always a man—of—sorts thrown in with the bargain," retorted the old woman. Adding malevolently: "You must have played your cards exceedingly badly to be still just where you were the day Jack Wyndham committed suicide."

If Iris winced inwardly under the reminder she did not show it.

"Why should you assume I'm so anxious to be married?" she asked lightly.

"Everyone assumes it. It's obvious, isn't it? You've

always got a pack of men trailing after you. You wouldn't encourage 'em if you didn't want them."

"Shouldn't I?" Iris remained irritatingly noncommittal. If her great-aunt's disagreeable comments sometimes caught her betwixt the joints of her armour she certainly contrived to repay the old lady by a perfectly infuriating serenity.

Lady Farnby held some knitting in her hands. The shining needles clicked irascibly for a few moments, while Iris, seemingly absorbed in her own thoughts, leaned idly against the window-frame.

"I shall really begin to believe you never quite got over Straton Quayne's turning you down," recommenced the old woman spitefully, at last.

Iris's misty, hyacinth-blue eyes rested on the vindictive old face with a faint amusement.

"Then for once you would be right. I never did," she acknowledged dryly.

Lady Farnby snorted incredulously.

"Humph! So the rest has been camouflage, has it?" she snapped. "I should never have thought it."

"Rather successful camouflage, then, apparently," returned her niece composedly.

Again the knitting needles clicked. Then, in a voice that fairly quivered with malicious triumph, Lady Farnby remarked:

"I suppose you know that Quayne has decided to sell Quayling and go abroad?"

"What!" The exclamation escaped Iris's lips before she could check it. Her face whitened and the pupils of the hyacinth-blue eyes dilated until they looked almost black.

Lady Farnby nodded contentedly. She could see that

this last thrust of hers had gone home with a vengeance.

"Quayling's up for sale," she repeated. "And I hear Straton is off in a week's time for Kenya Colony. I suppose he finds he can't stick England any longer. I'm sure I don't blame him. He's had a rotten time of it—thanks to you."

"To me?" Iris hardly breathed the words.

"Yes. You ruined the man's life. First you play the devil with him and his best friend, and then when he marries you give his wife away to him."

"I didn't do that. I tried to save a smash. I may have done many bad things, but at least I did try to save his happiness for him. I saw how things were going with Lester and Jill, and I tried to warn Straton."

"*Pour le bon motif,* of course," sneered Lady Farnby. "Well, I hope he appreciated it, my dear. He doesn't look much as if he did." With which parting thrust the old lady gathered up her knitting and left the room, satisfied that for once she had got the better of her great-niece.

Iris stayed very still after she had gone. The news of Quayne's imminent departure had shocked her into the realisation of what it would signify to her—never to see him again, never to hear his voice or touch his hand. Just the mere acquaintanceship which was all that lay between them now had meant everything to her, diffusing a wistful bitter-sweetness through the utter barrenness of her life. Sometimes, those chance meetings with him—here or there, at someone's house, along the country roads—had hurt her to the very core of her being. Yet she would not have been without them. And now, if what her aunt had told her were true, in a few days she would see Straton no longer. He would be gone out of her life—ruthlessly and unequivocally.

But perhaps Lady Farnby was wrong. There might not be any real foundation for the story that Quayling was to be sold. Gossip in a little country place like Doon St. Frances ran rife, and centred inevitably about a well-known man whose wife had left him under such unhappy circumstances. So Iris argued, this way and that, trying to convince herself that Lady Farnby was mistaken. But the uncertainty nearly drove her mad.

In the distance, betwixt the budding branches of the trees, she could see the red roof of Quayling. It seemed to call her, beckon her through the afternoon sunlight as once before it had beckoned her beneath the harvest moon. Her thoughts travelled backward, slowly, painfully, to that distant evening when Straton had found her on the terrace and she had begged and implored his forgiveness—unavailingly. He had loved her then, and it had been bitter to him to send her from him. Yet he had done it. Since then he had loved another woman—and she had deserted him. Would he be so hard, so unforgiving now? Or would there be just a remnant of that old first passionate love still lingering in his heart—a memory-laden ghost that might live again?

That glimpse of red roof—the roof that sheltered the beloved man—still seemed to call to her through the trees. She wavered, her breath coming quickly and unevenly between her parted lips. Then, with a swift movement snatching up the cloak which she had discarded when she came in an hour earlier from the garden, she stepped out, hatless, into the bright spring sunlight and bent her steps towards Quayling.

As she went across the meadows and through the woods, all the way the remembrance of the September evening on which she had traversed that same road be-

fore was with her, so real, so vivid, that when at last she found herself on the flagged terrace which overlooked the sea it came upon her almost as a shock to find the windows of the house, not as they had been on that long ago night, blind and shuttered, but open, like wide eyes, to the sunlight. And then her glance travelled on and she saw Straton himself, at the far end of the terrace, leaning over the wall, looking out across the sea. She paused for a moment, her gaze fastened on his face. It was rather haggard-looking, the lines on either side of the mouth scored deeply into the cheeks. The deep-set eyes, fixed on the distant horizon, were blank and unseeing, as though the man's thoughts were bent inwards.

Iris moved swiftly towards him, her light footsteps making no sound upon the flags. But, almost as she reached his side, something seemed to apprise him that he was no longer alone, and he turned round and looked at her.

"What are you doing here?" he said slowly. He did not seem surprised to see her. It was almost as though her presence fitted in in some way with the thoughts which had been usurping his mind.

"I came—to see you," she answered. Then, unable to keep back the longing, the need to know, that was uppermost in her mind, she went on rapidly: "Is it true, Straton—is it true?"

He surveyed her with puzzled eyes.

"Is what true?"

She gestured impatiently.

"Is it true that you're going away—leaving Quayling?"

"Yes, it's quite true."

"Why are you going?" she asked.

He faced round on her.

"I'm going because I've nothing left in England except memories—damnable memories." There was a note of desperate truth in his voice. She had found him in an unstrung mood, and for once the shield of calm indifference which he had raised betwixt himself and the rest of the world was down.

Iris looked away, her eyes brooding.

"And I'm responsible for—some—of those memories," she said slowly.

He regarded her consideringly.

"Yes," he said at last. "Perhaps—in a way—for all."

She made no protest. Following the track of his thoughts she realised that to a certain extent all that had come about lay actually at her door.

"Straton, is there any hope for me—for us?" The appeal in her tone seemed to rouse him. He glanced at her quickly, almost suspiciously.

"Hope—for us? I don't understand," he said.

She made a fierce, impulsive movement towards him.

"Don't you?" she said, her voice gathering in intensity. "Is it so difficult, Straton? Oh, surely you've not forgotten that you once—cared? . . . Do you remember, here, on this very terrace, how I begged you to forgive me? And you wouldn't. You sent me away—even though, then, I think it hurt you as much as it hurt me. You thought I'd failed you. . . . You've loved another woman since then, and she's failed you, too. She—doesn't want you."

"No," he said quietly. "You're right. She doesn't want me. What then?"

"This!" she said, her arms flung wide in a gesture of utter selflessness. "You're lonely—and sad. Let me

comfort you. Let me go with you, Straton, wherever you've designed to go. I won't ask much—demand much of you—only just the right to creep back and make you a little less lonely, a little less unhappy. I know I ruined your happiness once—perhaps twice, as they say. . . . But for me, you might never have distrusted Jill. God knows. But that's all finished now—over. Let me try—just to make you a little happy once again," she paused. "Will you? . . . *Will* you, Straton?"

The urgent sweetness of her, the tenderness, the utter abnegation of self! She had come to him, when he wandered alone in the wilderness, only asking to atone, to make that wilderness less dreary. So she stood, amazingly beautiful, with the sunlight weaving a red halo of her burnished hair, and in her face all the longing, all the supreme tenderness of a woman who, whether she be good or bad, loves her man with every fibre of her being. And she was no child, no thoughtless, passionate girl offering she knew not what. It was enough for her that she loved him—that by facing all the world holds of obloquy and scorn she might yet help him back to some modicum of happiness. She was willing to brave everything, sacrifice everything that mattered to a woman of her world, if she could do that. Only a man who cared utterly for some other woman could have failed to respond in some sort, failed to be touched to his very depths. But Quayne was that man, and manlike, the love and tenderness of the woman he didn't want counted with him as nothing at all. He turned aside from her contemptuously.

"Are you mad, Iris? You broke my life. It was you who first taught me to distrust a woman. Let that be

sufficient for you. Don't imagine that you could paste the pieces together again."

She shrank back. A long, sobbing breath forced itself between her lips. In a single sentence he had flung the whole onus of his ruined life on her, regardless of how he himself had met the testing. Dimly, down the ages, she heard the echo of the first man's cry: "The woman thou gavest me, she tempted me." And then, somewhere within her, awoke the mother-instinct, the essential woman which, hurt and wounded to the quick, still conquers its own pain in the impulse to shield and shelter and help what it loves.

"Then go back to Jill. She still loves you." The words seemed forced out of her.

Quayne's brows drew together. His thoughts concentrated on Jill, he was blindly heedless of the sentient, quivering soul of the woman beside him.

"I shouldn't imagine so—after the way I've treated her," he returned hardly.

Iris winced. He had made it so clear to her, so terribly, palpably clear, that she herself simply didn't count at all in his scheme of life. There was only one way by which she could help him—through another woman. Perhaps the moment that followed was the supremest moment of her life, when she entreated him for that other woman—the woman who had won his love when she herself had lost it.

"Then you're wrong," she said, with quiet conviction. "I'm quite sure Jill loves you now exactly as much as she has ever loved you. You've hurt her, of course—but you can heal the hurt, and only you. . . . Women don't stop loving, Straton—that's just the trouble."

She smiled wistfully, a smile wrung from the Geth-

semane of her own heart, and all at once it was born in upon Straton that this woman, too, whatever her faults, had never stopped loving. The crust of his egotism crumbled suddenly.

"Iris . . . Iris . . ." he stammered brokenly.

"If I could only help you back to happiness!" she whispered.

The deep-set eyes were curiously gentle as he answered her. He took her hand and held it closely.

"You've been very splendid, Iris," he said. "But neither you nor anyone else can do that. Jill would have forgiven me once. Now—now that I understand things better—I don't blame her that she can't."

CHAPTER XII

PLAYING THE GAME

JILL was sitting alone in the studio, musing on the ironical discrepancies of life. Both her pictures had been hung on the line, and the more important of the two had created much the same kind of furore, only more pronounced, as had "The Uncounted Third." There was no problem embodied in this one, however. In the Academy catalogue the line entitling the picture ran: "Till He Comes Back," and it was the very simplicity of the subject which appealed. A woman wearing the rough clothes of a fisherman's wife was standing at a cottage window, gazing out to sea, where the sails of a fishing fleet were disappearing in the morning mist. The hand which pressed against the window-frame was rough and reddened with work, the face that of a woman no longer young, yet the intense humanness of the expression delineated on it kept a constant crowd of people thronging round the picture. It held the quiet patience of all women who wait and watch—the patience, and the faith which carries them through the dark hours of uncertainty, and the love which follows after the man and mate who has fared forth on his day's work.

Oh, yes, the picture had been an unqualified success and added enormously to the reputation of the young artist who had painted it. Yet Jill, realising this, felt no corresponding thrill. Success meant so little to her now.

It was dust and ashes. Perhaps, some day, it would come to mean more. She hoped it would. At present, life didn't seem to have any particular meaning at all.

The melody of a song which Garry used to sing was whispering hauntingly in her ears. Half unconsciously her lips formulated the words.

> "But there's sure one way of loving which is fair,
> If you give and take alike, and share and share,
> Never grudge each other's work, or play, or laughter,
> That's a love will last through all your life—and after.
> O there's just one way to love!"

That was what had been wrong betwixt herself and Straton. They hadn't shared alike, and in a way, without realising it probably, he had grudged her work—grudged anything, in fact, that she had or did apart from him. And she had rebelled. The rebellion had been natural enough, but now, with her deeper knowledge of relative values, she would have been ready to give it all up, knowing fully what the sacrifice must entail, if only love itself could have been saved. But it was too late, now—too late.

The door of the studio opened suddenly and old Madelon stood aside to admit a visitor. Jill rose instinctively, then, with a quick, caught breath, stood still, her hand gripping the back of her chair, as she recognised the newcomer.

"Miss—Miss Lethbridge!" she exclaimed.

Iris came in and the door closed behind her. She was rather pale, and her eyes were curiously luminous, as though lit by some inner fire.

"Yes," she said quietly. "You're surprised I should come here, of course."

"I don't know why I should be, I'm sure," responded

Jill lamely. "There's no reason why you shouldn't come to see me, I suppose."

Iris smiled, a faint, ironical smile of amusement.

"Oh, yes, there is," she said. "Let's be frank with each other for once. We both love the same man—and that's never exactly a bond between two women."

Jill stiffened.

"In that case, then, why have you come?"

"Because I've something particular to say to you. May I sit down?"

"Please do." Jill gestured to a chair and sat down herself. "What is it you want to say to me?"

Iris remained silent a moment. Then she bent forward, and said quietly:

"I've come to ask you to go back to your husband—to go back to Straton."

A quick flush ran up beneath Jill's skin, then drained away again, leaving her paler than before.

"You ask me to do that?" she said, with a faint but unmistakable inflection on the word "you."

The other nodded.

"Yes, I ask it.'

"But—but why? I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Don't you?" Again that pale ghost of a smile flitted across Iris's lips. "And yet, it's so easy to understand. I love him." She spoke with a curious simplicity. "I love him, and I want him to be happy. And only you can make him so."

"I think you're mistaken," replied Jill coldly.

"And I know I'm not. Listen to me. If you don't go back—now, to-morrow—you'll regret it as long as you live."

Somehow Iris's urgency had the contrary effect upon

Jill from that intended. She distrusted her—this woman whom Straton had once loved, whom, she believed, he must still love. She rose, as though to terminate the interview.

"I have no intention of going back—either to-morrow or any other time," she said stiffly. "So I don't think we need discuss the matter any further."

"You think I'm intruding," put in Iris quickly. "That I've no business to interfere. I know it must seem like that to you. But there's something you don't know, that Straton will never tell you. And I don't want you to find it out only when it's too late. He's going away—selling Quayling and going out of England."

Jill's heart gave a great leap, then started racing in her side. Her legs felt as though they were giving way beneath her and she sank down again into her chair. It was only by an immense effort that she steadied her voice.

"I think, if that was the case, I should have heard the news from Lady Susan. She would hardly have left it for—you—to tell me."

Iris, sensing the other's complete distrust of her, made a gesture of impatience.

"She didn't know. No one knows yet. I only knew because Mrs. Brayton happened to let it out to my aunt's maid."

"Servants' hall gossip—I'm afraid I shouldn't put much belief in that."

The older woman hesitated a moment, then she said quietly:

"You *must* believe it. Straton himself told me that he was going."

Jill froze. So that was it! Straton was going away,

and he had told—Iris. It all seemed horribly, dreadfully clear. The only thing she couldn't understand was why Iris had come to tell her about it—unless she had wanted to lead her into saying that she was willing to go back to Straton and then triumph over her.

"In that case, presumably, it is not I whom he wants —to go back——" Jill's voice trembled and broke off. All her determination could not keep it quite steady. Then, with a sudden proud candour, she added: "I'm not surprised. He cared for you first, and I suppose he can't help still caring."

"Is that what you think?" asked Iris slowly.

Jill nodded.

"What else can I think?"

A long silence followed. Iris sat stoopingly, with bent head, her hands tightly clasped round her knee. At last she straightened herself and, lifting her head, began to speak in a low voice of intense feeling.

"I must tell you the truth, then—I must. I didn't mean to, but you won't believe without it. You think Straton cares for me? Well, you're wrong. I wish to God he did! He's the only man I love, or ever shall love. But I'm no more to him than the chair I'm sitting on. Listen." She leaned forward and her tense gaze held Jill's unwaveringly. "When I found he was going out of England—leaving everything and going abroad —I went to him and asked him to take me with him. I knew he couldn't marry me, but I didn't care. I was willing to go with him any way. Willing—I *begged* him to take me! And he wouldn't. . . . There aren't many men who would have refused," she added, not in any vanity but with a simple knowledge of her own rare loveliness. "But Straton refused, because there's only

one woman in the world who counts with him—and you're that woman." She paused, as though almost at the end of her strength. After a moment she went on bleakly: "It isn't easy—telling another woman that her husband has turned you down. . . . I thought I'd some pride once. Now I've none—if having none will give Straton back his happiness."

Again silence fell—a breathless, palpitating silence. To Jill it seemed as though someone had torn asunder a veil—the distorting veil of misunderstanding and mistrust which had hung so long betwixt her and her husband. He was going away—not because he loved Iris, but because he loved *her*. And it was Iris who, at the expense of her own shrinking, tortured pride, had torn the veil asunder. She could find no words. Words could only have hurt that other woman crouching there in the chair opposite. She held out her hand and Iris gripped it with tense, working fingers.

"You'll go to him?" she said eagerly.

Jill met the gaze, tragically beseeching, of the hyacinth-blue eyes.

"Yes. I'll go," she said.

The latch of the gate clicked beneath Jill's hand as she let herself into the garden at Quayling. She had walked up from the station, taking a short cut through the lanes, and now she was approaching the house by way of the garden in order to avoid the chance of being seen by anyone from the windows. May sunshine lay all about her path, dappling it with tremulous shadows of tree and shrub. Spring was in the air—spring triumphant, with the sap running upward in the trees, the buds breaking into leaf, the sweet fragrances of early flowers borne

to her on the fugitive breeze. From the green secrecy of a branch above her came a blackbird's fluting song.

And then, from one of the dim alleyways of the garden, someone came towards her—a man, walking slowly with bent head, his hands clasped behind him. Jill stood still and her arms went out uncertainly towards him, then dropped again to her sides. She felt frightened, hesitant.

"Straton!"

It seemed to her as though she only whispered the word, as though no voice came. But he heard, and halted where he was, staring at her amazedly. Then, in a few quick strides, he had reached her side.

"Jill . . . Jill, what are you doing here?"

There was that in his voice which suddenly robbed her of all fear—a wild, incredulous gladness that found its answer in her own heart. She turned to him swiftly.

"I've come back, Straton—I've come back!"

For a moment he hesitated, holding her at arm's length.

"You wanted to come back?" he demanded hoarsely.

She nodded.

"I think I've been wanting to come back ever since I ran away," she answered, tremulously smiling.

The next moment his arms went round her, and she felt once more the lips she loved crush down on hers in a kiss that held all the passionate love and longing which had never died, never weakened, but only grown the stronger for the long months of separation. And so, alone in the garden where spring held sway, that place of new beginnings and new promise, Straton and Jill came again into their happiness.

It was later on, when they were pacing up and down the paths together, that she told him she did not propose

to continue her painting now that they were together once more. She had known, when she promised Iris she would go back to him, that it must mean this fresh sacrifice of her art, but she was making it now on no passionate, ignorant girlish impulse—making it with her eyes wide open, realising to the full that the happiness which love gives is often bought at a price, and not deeming that price too much to pay.

Quayne regarded her questioningly.

"But you won't be happy like that, Jill," he objected.

She met his glance with the brave honesty of her own.

"Possibly not—quite. But other women have done it—given up things. . . . and"—with a humorous little smile—"I think you're worth it, my Straton."

Quayne stood still, looking down at her with a sudden eager light in his eyes.

"Do you mean that, Jill? That you're really *willing* to give it up?"

"Yes, I mean it."

He snatched her up in his arms and kissed her.

"Oh bless you, darling, for being willing!" he exclaimed. "But I'm—*not* willing. I don't want you to make any such sacrifice for me. I've learned that marriage shouldn't ask that of a woman—not such an unequal sacrifice. I'm beginning to think Lady Susan is right. We men"—smiling rather whimsically—"have been kings of the earth too long."

"Do you mean—we'll start over again—and I can go on with my work?"

He nodded.

"Just that," he said.

Jill put her hand up to cover her eyes a moment. When

she took it down there was a quiet, still radiance in them —the radiance of a dream that has come true.

"Oh, Straton," she said, half laughing, half crying. "It was going to hurt so horribly—giving it up a second time. And now—now it seems almost too good to be true."

He shook his head.

"Nothing's too good to be true," he said, "if only we all played the game."

THE END